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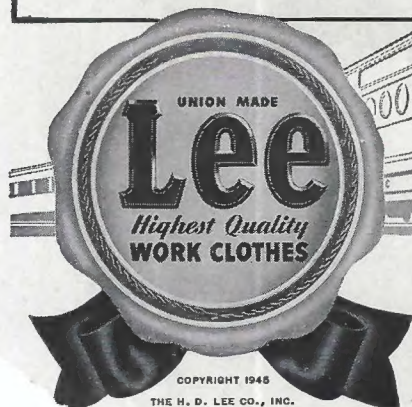
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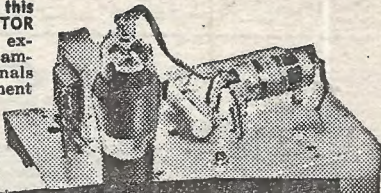
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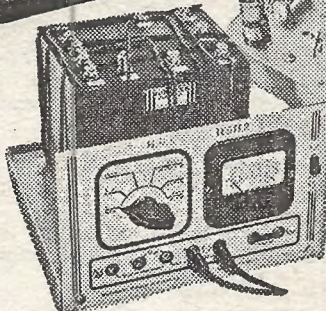
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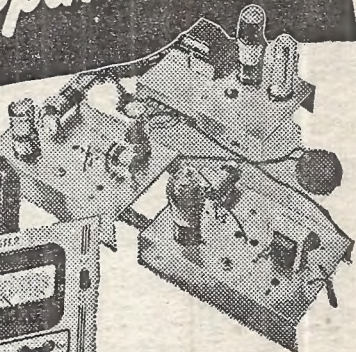
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Vol. 16, No. 4

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★ ROUND-UP ★

IN THE mail pouch this month came the following letter from historian Montgomery Mulford, who is currently busy shooting it out with other Western authorities over his claim that the history of the American West can best be told as a series of small, but decisive, wars. Our Western heroes, he says, have been given a raw deal by the Eastern-born writers of history books, who devote many chapters to John Paul Jones and brush off a whole generation of fighting Western lawmen in one paragraph. He writes:

Editor, *Big-Book Western*:

Our country's histories barely mention the Kansas Civil War of 1854-56; to get the story you must peruse certain dusty tomes, even biographies for the full picture—such as the Nicholay and Hay first volume of "Abraham Lincoln" (there are ten books in the series). Wasn't that struggle a war?

European histories do not slur over such conflicts as the "Seven Years' War," and several paragraphs are usually devoted, in the texts, to this struggle.

Which causes one to ponder: What is a war? In a recent issue of *Big-Book Western* there's a storied-feature on the Arizona range feud of the late 1880's; wasn't that a war?

Sometimes one may pause to wonder who decides what a war is; and the selection isn't always in perspective. If a war is a fight between two distinct countries—or between two parts of a country, making it a civil war—doesn't the Kansas "County Seat" war deserve to be so treated? Our American history is filled with dramatic adventures, a vast majority of which are buried and unknown, because the texts often do not even refer to them. And this is too bad, because we lose some of the real flavor of our stirring story.

In the building of the West—its conquest and settlement—there *were* many wars, even though the staid histories forget to mention them. There are many unknown heroes, as a result, as heroic as any daredevil of our so-called recognized wars.

Why not also give them their due?

History is nothing more than the story of the struggle of righteous men to build an empire; a struggle for happiness and economic security. In this struggle wars are a natural consequence, brought on by evil men or evil influences, which must be stamped out; and can only be stamped out through war.

The men who fought the Battle of the Bulge,

who raised the flag on Iwo Jima were brave, unexcelled warriors; but so were many of the Western people who pioneered across the continent. World War II, proved to some doubting nations that an American could fight—we knew it, because it is really one of our great heritages.

We glory in such sea-history as that of the exploits of privateersman John Paul Jones; of the naval wars against the Barbary pirates—but many Western heroes battled as evil forces, and great forces, to a win. Are they not deserving as much praise in our history books?

What we need is a new appraisal of war; a new definition of war, and published evidence that so many wars are necessary in order to crush the evils confronting us. . . . Probably, too, what we need today is an organization of earnest men and women who might band together into what could be titled the Society for the Glorification and Preservation of Western War History. Anyone want to join?

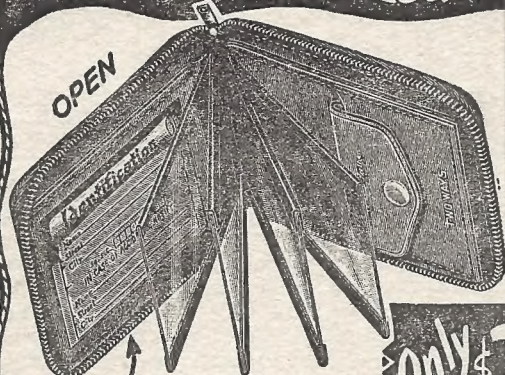
That society you propose, Pardner, is quite a mouthful, but you might have something there, at that. Certainly, much of the history of the West is, curiously enough, appearing in print for the first time in such magazines as *Big Book*.

Ignored by the conventional historians, passed down in written fragments or by word of mouth, some of the great stories of the Old West have come to light for the first time in these very pages. And remember, *Big Book's* realistic fiction and dramatic fact articles are on the stands each month now, instead of every two months, in a brand new issue. . . . The next of which, by the way, will be published January 18th.

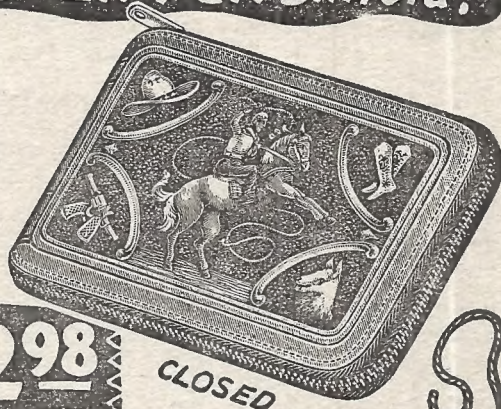
—The Editor



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EASY AS PIE



By Jimmy Nichols

*"How can you ask me to work?" Bummer Dan explained.
"Ain't I the West's most moronic poet?"*

BUMMER DAN stumbled over the doorstep of the sun-baked saloon in Virginia City and held out his palsied hand to the bartender.

"Here," said Bummer Dan, "here is where it says about me." His stubby, dirty forefinger traced painfully down the column of the daily newspaper to a fat, black headline. "Read it to me," requested the Bummer.

The bartender whistled. "Well, I'll be . . . well, I'll be . . . looka here, what it says."

Several steady customers, without bothering to straighten out their elbows, eased over to hear what was happening. The bartender read painfully, "Prize-winning poem. That's the big letters. And then it says . . ." he read:

MYSELF

by

Bummer Dan

Throughout the West there is no man,

Like myself, Bummer Dan.

Why should I work and sweat,

When on these miners I can eat?

"Well, I'll be damned!" said one grizzled miner, leaving his beer to bubble and settle unattended as he crowded over the bartender's shoulder to read Bummer Dan's literary masterpiece.

"That ain't all," protested Bummer Dan. "See here, it says 'This takes the prize for the most obnoxious and moronic pretention to literary genius ever made in Virginia City.'"

"Signed, the editor," finished the bartender. "Literary genius!" yelled Bummer Dan happily.

The grizzled miner stepped forward and flung a sack of dust on the bar. "Set up a round on me," he said. "I wanna drink with a literary genius."

The editor's highbrow criticism created a sensation in Virginia City, passing entirely over the heads of most of its citizens who had had less than a genteel education. It made Bummer Dan, who had earned his sobriquet by bumming liquor, clothes and food off everyone in the West part of town, a genuine celebrity. And, like all celebrities, for a while, as long as his star was ascendant, Bummer Dan lived off the fat of the land.

He was a lovable man, harmless, friendly as a puppy, who simply found it easier to borrow smokes and drinks from someone else than to earn them himself. And certainly the

editor of the newspaper had brought it all upon himself. The poetry contest had been his idea. The Bummer couldn't read or write, but he had prevailed upon a comrade to scrawl his entry down in longhand and then he had slipped it under the editor's door the following night. He was delighted with the editorial comment and went around boasting openly, "I am obnoxious."

Finally, however, captious Virginia City tired of its literary genius.

The free meals slacked off, one by one. Bummer Dan could no longer draw an audience by reciting his poem or displaying his press clipping. He assumed again his usual lean and hungry aspect, his clothes once more began to flap emptily against his lanky frame. And so, one day, the Bummer happened to walk past a cook shack and there, cooling on the windowsill, was a fragrant green apple pie. His poetic nose sniffed the mellow cinnamon.

Thirty seconds later, a trio of miners swung around the corner to find Bummer Dan on his haunches with his back propped against the cook shack and his mouth stuffed full of plainly stolen pie.

At a kangaroo court hearing, held on the spot, it was decided that the Bummer must learn to earn his way. They grabbed him, took away the pie, and hustled him, squirming, to a dreary gravel gulch at the edge of town.

They thrust into his soft, pink palms a heavy steel pick-axe. "Now dig!" they ordered. Helpless, Bummer Dan began to poke at the clay-colored gravel bed, which had never been worked, since it appeared worthless. After a half hour, the frontier poet had dug out a hole about the size of a baseball. The miners went away, but threatened to come back.

When they returned, they found Bummer Dan sitting cross-legged on the rim of a large hole. His pick was lying by his side, and he didn't seem in the least panicked when the miners found him doing nothing. Through his laced fingers he was sifting gravel . . . gravel crossed with yellow dust and scattered with heavy golden nuggets. The bonanza, carrying the highest percentage of gold of all the strikes ever made in Alder Gulch at Virginia City, was later marked on the maps as Bummer Dan's Bar. And the Bummer, needless to say, had that sundown completed the last day's work he ever did in his life.



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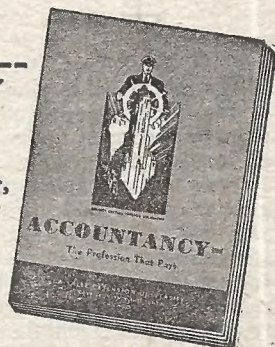
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By Tom W. Blackburn

Chapter I

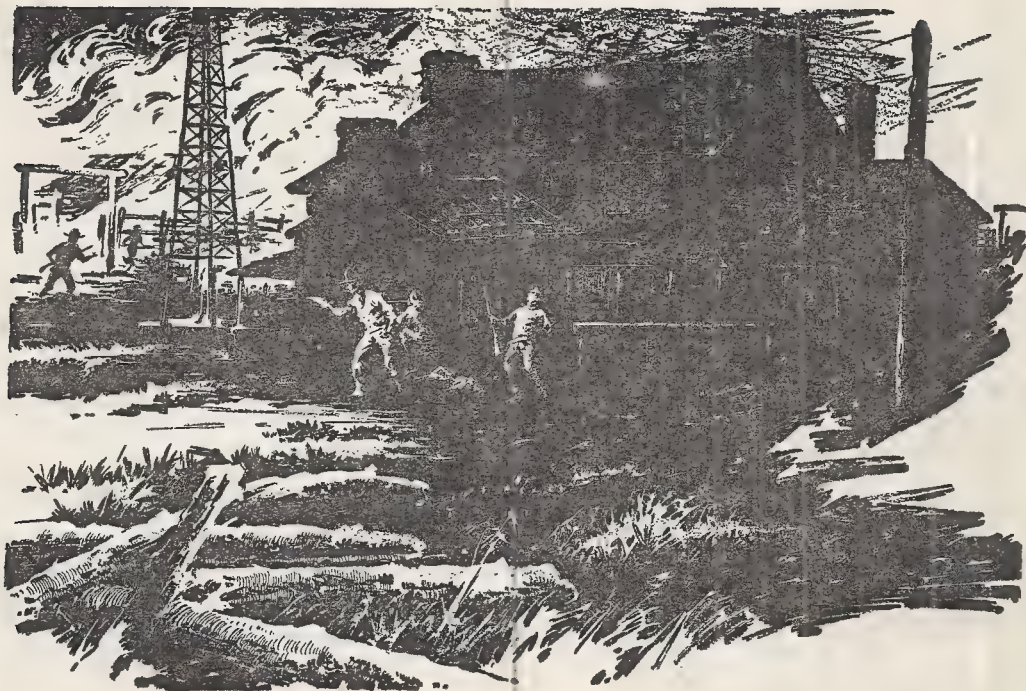
CHALLENGE FROM ZEBRA

AT MORA or Taos or Raton there was a name that would make talk quicker than any other in New Mexico. And it was mixed talk, fluffed up with a good deal of impossible legend and salted with recollections of the apocryphal doings of three generations of wild men and their women. It was talk of improvidence and monumental recklessness; of ungoverned, unreasonable furies; of savagery and beautiful women and a race of big, flame-headed men with the devilry of satan bred into their blood.

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That name was Candless.

Clay Alston first encountered it on the yellowed records at the county seat where he had gone to hunt out tax-defaulted lands he might pick up to increase the spread of the Hueco valley ranch for which he had traded his scattered holdings in the Panhandle. Nearly every parcel on the default lists bore the Candless name on its title. And all of the sixty-four hundred acres he had bid in on the Hueco had once been a part of the Candless holdings. The name meant little to him, then, although he had already begun to hear fragments of the Candless legend. When the county judge had approved the tax sale, he had passed on a warning with it.



THERE'S FREE LAND IN HELL!

In the wild border country, the name Candless meant flame-headed men with Satan's deviltry bred into them, and flaxen-haired beauties as wild as the savage range they owned. . . . But for young Clay Alston that famous name meant instant death—unless the blood of the last Candless could quench the lawless fires that raged along that strip of hell-and-brimstone frontier!

"Son, I've made your title to this land as tight as the law will allow. It'll hold in any court. But damned little that happens in this country ever reaches a court. You may have a bloody chore on your hands. You should know it."

"Candless?" Clay had idly asked.

"Yes, Candless," the old judge had nodded solemnly.

Alston had observed that old men had a habit of making private jokes, more to amuse themselves than their listeners. He had thought the judge's offhand caution was some-

thing of this nature. Now, however, he was learning differently.

He swung down deliberately from his saddle, lifted the flaps of his bags, and pulled out a coil of patching wire and a pair of nippers. Across the fence line the two riders watched him narrowly. They said nothing until he'd walked across to the span in the fence where the break was—a break cut deliberately in the tight new wire. He picked up the sheared end of the bottom strand and started splicing the patching wire to it.

One of the riders spoke softly. The other

shifted in his seat and the sun winked brightly from the blued barrel of a gun.

"Friend," the man said, "that break stays cut. Back off!"

Alston dropped his nippers into his hip pocket and let the coil of patching wire trail from his hand. He brushed his hat back a little and studied the pair. A quick anger at the cut wire, suddenly come upon, had made him, thus far, more than half ignore them. The drawn gun and the hard, flat warning, however, made a difference.

The man with the gun was cut to the same pattern as most good beef bosses. A middling sized carcass, muscled and built a little heavier than the usual hand. A weather-roughened face, uncompromising eyes, and an air of tough, sure competence. Alston brushed over him. The man's companion was the compelling one of the two. For the companion was a woman.

She was young. Her features were regular, almost to perfection. A mass of deep-hued, coppery hair spilled from under a soft range hat. She was dressed in worn range gear which managed to accentuate a long, curved, very feminine figure. The elements of a startling beauty were about her. But Clay's first impression was not of these. This girl seemed to emanate a spirit of scantily checked personal power and a steady, unrelenting defensiveness. Clay had known a man or two imbued with that spirit—restless, reckless men who owed the world a fight and who lived only with trouble.

The rider with the gun was obviously in the girl's employ. Alston nodded curtly to her.

"I strung this fence. I aim to patch it. You object, Ma'am?"

A tight grin flashed across the girl's lips. When she spoke her voice was low-pitched and the recklessness of her spirit ran in her tones.

"You put it mildly!" she snapped. "Candleless grass and wire have never gone together. That fence stays down!"

"This isn't Candleless grass," Clay offered steadily. "It's Hawk grass, now, paid for in cash. And that wire is mine. It goes up and it stays!"

"Money!" the girl snorted. "How can cash buy land that was bought in the first place with blood from a Spanish king? Bert, it looks like there's another lesson due—"

THE man with the gun grinned lazily. A sheen of anticipation ran over his face. He shifted the gun significantly. "Climb back in your leather, friend," he said. "You've got thirty seconds."

Hardness had sheeted over the beauty of the girl's face. Clay saw that this man with her was a handy son with his hands and that

the fact had given both of them an easy confidence.

"A lesson," Clay said quietly, "can work two ways. I deeply regret this, Ma'am—!"

At the same time, he swung forward, sliding through the gap in the fence in two long strides. The man in the saddle above him tipped his gun downward, but Clay had already seized his near ankle. He jerked powerfully. The gun fired over Clay's head; then the rider was down in the dust. He came swiftly to his feet, and Clay backed a step to give him room, then swiftly attacked.

It seemed that Bert was as good with his hands as his appearance and his easy confidence had indicated. He fainted cleverly, caught Clay off-guard, and jolted a hard right fist to the easy target of Clay's belly. It was a ruthless, hurting, blow, and it took Clay's wind. But it also crystallized the slow anger which had been building in Clay ever since he had seen the sheared wires of his fence.

Staggered, Clay held himself together and stepped forward, coming down hard with his boot on one of the rider's toes. If this was to be rules-off, then two could play at it. With the man's foot anchored to the ground, Clay's drive to the center of his face took a double toll. And he gave the fellow no time to recover. He crossed and swung again, a solid full blow to the flat side of the man's jaw. The rider sagged. Clay hit him twice more and stepped back. The rider collapsed. And when he hit the dust the thirty-second limit he had set for Clay to hit leather had barely passed. Clay stepped back.

"Ma'am," he addressed the woman, "my name is Clay Alston. I bought the Hawk. I also bought ten sections of tax-delinquent bottoms here along the Hueco. I aim to build the Hawk into a producing spread. I'd admire to have neighbors and I'd admire to have friends. But I don't take to cut fences or being crowded on my own land. When a fight's offered me, I'll take it!"

The girl studied the man on the ground. He had risen to his heels and was swabbing at the ruin of his face. He stabbed a glance of raw malevolence at Clay. The girl's eyes raised. She looked full at Clay and he felt again the hard power in her.

"I am Melody Candleless," she said proudly. "The Zebra was here on the Hueco before there were any tax laws—before there were any laws at all. The Zebra was built with guns and it will live by guns. If you haven't heard it already, you soon will. The Candleless clan will tolerate no neighbors. Run your Hawk. Build it any way you like. But stay out of the Hueco bottoms. If you don't, you'll have your fight. And don't take today as a sign of Candleless warring. No man has ever beaten Bert Brennan down twice. The Zebra

may not pay taxes every season, but it runs the toughest crew on the *llanos*. And there's still a Candless to rod it!"

The girl backed her mount. Bert Brennan rose then, dusted himself, and swung to his saddle. The pair turned and rode off toward a butte rising a couple of miles down valley. When they were gone Clay picked up Brennan's gun, left where it had fallen, and thrust it into his waistband. He repaired the cut in the fence, remounted, and turned thoughtfully back toward Hawk headquarters.

He had made a slick trade on the Hawk. The ranch was twice as valuable as his acreage in the Panhandle had been. He had felt elated over this. He had felt that out of a dozen years on the range, out of hard riding since youth, he had the beginnings of something big under his hand. He was beginning to understand why the trade had been easy, now. It was not easy to buck any woman. But a woman like Melody Candless—!

He shrugged. It was the old pattern of quarrelling neighbors. There was only one thing missing. Such quarrels were usually the result of personal differences or a dispute over the use of a patch of grass. But the owners of the Hawk and the Zebra were strangers to each other and somehow the matter of the Hueco bottoms did not seem as important as Melody Candless was obviously trying to make him believe.

A baseless hunch was in Alston that the legends of the Candless clan were a screen of smoke in this and that there was another and sounder reason for the Zebra's aversion to neighbors than merely a tradition for lone-wolfing on the Hueco.

Chapter II

BROKEN LINKS

TRACY MCGOVERN, manager for the Packer's Corporation's holdings on the Hueco, was waiting at the Hawk house. Alston had dealt with the Packer's in the Panhandle at two or three of their spreads and had found the men the huge combine hired were a good sort. Maybe held in check a bit by the main office at Kansas City, but friendly and square enough, as far as the rules went. McGovern was no exception.

He had ridden over the first day Clay was on the Hawk. He'd found a cook and some local hands for Clay, and had made introductions at the Hueco bank that had helped him get credit lined up. He'd also offered the loan of some gear and made himself generally a good neighbor. Clay appreciated these things. And, entirely aside from them, he liked the big, blond, open-faced giant.

McGovern watched him ride into the yard, swing down at the corral, and turn his mount into the enclosure. McGovern watched him hang his saddle on the top rail and pump himself a drink from the well midway across the yard. McGovern was tipped back in a chair on the veranda, grinning wryly, as he came up the steps.

"So it happened," McGovern said.

Alston had not yet ridden out all of his anger. His right wrist was swollen and skin was gone from the knuckles of that hand.

"Happened?" he said. "What happened?"

"You've met the little red devil of the Hueco."

Alston grunted and dropped into a chair. The gun in his waistband prodded him. He withdrew it and tossed it onto the empty chair between McGovern and himself. McGovern lifted the weapon. His brows went up.

"And that's not all," he added. "It looks like you pulled Bert Brennan's teeth. And a witness to see it! That's not a good beginning, Clay."

Alston grunted again. "It seemed fair for a starter," he protested. "What the devil should I have done, shot the son out of his seat?"

McGovern turned suddenly serious. "You could have done worse," he said quietly.

Clay sat forward. "What is this?" he snapped. "What kind of a layout is that over at the Zebra, anyway? I ride up and find my south fence cut clean. Melody Candless and this Brennan were waiting for me. It was plain enough. They'd seen me coming and then snipped the wire. Bait, plainly. But why?"

"The Hawk and those eight-ten sections of bottoms you bought haven't been grazed for four or five years. Off-hand, I'd say Zebra didn't want them grazed," McGovern suggested dryly.

Clay grimaced. "I was told as much. But that isn't the real reason and you know it. Why should a smoky-eyed little she-devil heat an iron for a man like that?"

McGovern looked at the toes of his boots. "You know my outfit," he said slowly. "Strict as hell on the rules. No mixing in local troubles—no moves without the main office putting the double-O on 'em first. But maybe this is a little different. I rode over this way to talk to you about it. How many head of stuff did you drive onto Hawk?"

"Three bunches. Say about forty-five hundred head. That's my stake."

"Take a tally in thirty days, Clay," McGovern suggested quietly. "I've a hunch that'll tell you why Zebra doesn't want any close neighbors."

Alston whistled softly. "So that's the reason for the tough crew! Burning brands over, eh?"

But look, that girl, heading an outfit at that kind of work—?"

McGOVERN shrugged. "I don't like it, either," he said. "That filly caught my eye the first day I ran into her. I been shakin' a loop for her ever since—a man'd be dead that wouldn't. The Candleless tribe may have been devils, but they sure wound up in a smokin' beauty. Still, a man runs beef for a living in this country and he'd be a fool to turn blind for a head of red hair. I shipped a crate of hides East two weeks ago that was mighty strong proof there was a snaky running iron loose on the Hueco, with every sign pointing square at the Zebra."

"Now you're waiting for orders—?"

McGovern nodded. "And in a deal like this, neighbors should work together. The head office has cut my crew, last couple of seasons. And the Zebra's got a packed bunkhouse. If the company should decide to clamp down, I'd admire having you side me."

Alston stood up. "I appreciate the tip-off, Tracy," he said. "And nobody is going to cull my herds. When my tally drops, I'll put every saddle I own out with you and your boys. But until then—well, I'm not one to holler till I'm bitten."

McGovern moved down the steps toward his mount at the rack before the house.

"Sure," he agreed. "That's fair enough. It's all hunch anyway, till I get orders. A man on a Packer's spread raises beef, but he don't think till he's told to. Still, it might be coming and I wanted you to know. It won't be a picnic, if it does come. The Candleless didn't build the Zebra into a hundred sections behind one fence by wearing mittens. And that girl and her brother have got more hell in them than all the old ones put together."

"Let me know what K. C. says about the hides you shipped in. Meanwhile I'll look about," Alston said slowly. "You might be guessing wide."

"I might be," McGovern agreed with a tight smile. "But there's one thing I'm not guessing about: Brennan. He's bad, Clay. Bad clean through. He's the only man that can handle the Zebra crew—that ought to give you an idea. If it doesn't, this will. Don't turn your back to a bosque. Don't hit town alone. And run your riders in pairs when they're on the Zebra side of your slopes. I take it you broke Bert Brennan's face. High, low, or foul, Brennan will hit back. And he'll hit hard!"

McGovern mounted, waved and rode off. Alston went on into the house, his face darkened in a scowl. The smell of powder was in the air. Clay was aware of it, but he was also aware of the remembered vision of a girl with coppery hair and a spirit as wild as these

untamed hills in which she had been born.

An hour later a horse drifted into the yard bearing a rider so new to the Hawk payroll that Clay was not even certain of his name. The man had been thoroughly beaten and roped unconscious onto his saddle. When he had been stretched out in the bunkhouse, Clay tried to question him. The fellow was badly spooked and kept asking for his time. It was only when Clay had promised him his check that he would talk at all. There was little enough, even then. He had been jumped at a ford near the boundary of the old Candleless sections in the bottoms. The attack had been too swift for him to see faces. There had been four men, although one of them had done most of the work. He had made one clutching reach for his assailants before he was clubbed down and kicked into unconsciousness. That clutch had netted one thing only, a broken length of heavy gold chain, such as might span the vest of a man who wore a pocket watch there. Clay took the broken links and started back to the house, tossing them thoughtfully in his hand.

This was raw work and needed a raw answer.

Chapter III

"GET OUT OF THE HUECO!"

MORNING was long in coming. Alston waited out the night impatiently. He saddled after breakfast, leaving his stock boss, Hank Dawson, to finish the task of lining out the new crew and getting Hawk wheels rolling. He rode across the bench on which the Hawk house sat, overlooking the Hueco valley from the north. An hour later he was in the bottoms, splashing slowly through the ford where his man had been jumped the night before.

It took him three hours to angle south and east across the bottoms and lift up onto the south bench to the folded piñon ridges where the first Candleless had built the Zebra house when Armijo was still in the Governor's Palace at Santa Fé. If a house could look like its builders, then the Zebra place looked like the Candleless clan. It was not too hard to understand the stiff pride in Melody Candleless when one saw her house.

It was a huge 'dobe, sprawled in the rectangular shape which made for easy living in this arid country. The central wing had two floors. It was solidly built, and its age was evident. Alston, who was a grass man and had known no permanence of his own, could see the beauty of the place and for the first time he began to grasp the size and the importance of the grazing kingdom the first Candleless must have had in these hills. Like

the old Maxwell place and Estancia and Trinchera to the north, Zebra was part and parcel of the history of the Cimarrons.

He angled a little west, avoiding the corrals and work buildings below the main house, and drove straight to the wide fronting veranda of the house itself. A man at the corrals saw him approaching and ducked hurriedly out of sight. Before he was well into the yard, half a dozen men had filed quietly up from below, lining themselves along the veranda. Among them he recognized Bert Brennan, his nose heavily taped with plasters. He remembered that McGovern had mentioned that Melody Candless had a brother. He wondered if one of the stony bunch in front of him was a Candless and thought not. They were a hard lot, but all of them lacked the high recklessness so marked in the girl.

Brennan held silent until Clay had halted and swung down, stepping clear of his horse. Then he spoke acidly.

"Ready to talk business, Alston?" he asked.

"Business?" Clay said easily. "With Zebra? No. Nor with you, Brennan. We had ours yesterday. Call this a neighborly call—and tell Miss Candless I'm here."

Brennan's face darkened. "Zebra's got no neighbors but wolves!" he snapped. "Miss Candless'll have no truck with you. If you

want trouble, keep your boots on the ground. If you don't, you've got two minutes to hit leather and tail out of here, right back the way you came!"

The Zebra boys bunched in behind Brennan. The same darkness was on every face, a hard, surly, defensive unfriendliness. Clay eyed them, measuring Brennan's ultimatum. Brennan waited for a little passage of time, then started purposefully forward. He had but taken a step, however, when the front door of the house opened.

"Bert—I!" a woman's voice called warningly.

Melody Candless was in the doorway. Brennan's truculence faded. He halted and touched the brim of his hat. The riders flanking him eased immediately. A quick and ready sort of deference touched them all. Alston removed his hat. However tough the Zebra crew might be, it was plain that this girl controlled it completely. She looked steadily at Clay, her eyes were as friendless as Brennan's had been.

"So you wanted to see me, Mr. Alston," she said quietly. "Yesterday wasn't enough? You're like the others, then, and a fool. Plain curiosity, isn't it? You've heard talk of the Candlesses and you want to see them up close. You've heard talk of what we have been and

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you want to see what we are now. Like a hunter out on a drive, looking at a dying bear that's got a bullet out of every gun in the party in him. Well, go ahead—look close. Then get out! And remember this: Zebra is hurt, but it isn't dead!"

Clay shook his head. "It isn't that, Ma'am," he answered steadily. "There was trouble yesterday, and more trouble last night. Trouble can grow and it is a thing I won't swallow. There's only one way to stop it and that's to root it out in the beginning. I rode over here to talk to you. And there are some things I want to return."

"Talk?" the girl's voice was incredibly bitter. "Talk doesn't grow grass and work cattle. It doesn't pay notes and interest and taxes. It doesn't fill empty saddles. I've had enough of talk!"

"You're biting the bit," Clay persisted. "You're fighting the wind. Why?"

"Why?" Melody Candless laughed unpleasantly. "Can you dig a hole in rock with your finger nails? Can you drive a spike with your bare fist? Can you run a ranch, trying to save a hundred sections out of something that used to total a million acres, when half of a State is pitched against you because of the kind of men your grandfather and your great-grandfather have been? Can you do that and be a woman, besides?"

ALSTON saw a great deal about Melody Candless in this moment. There was no outward sign beyond her words, but he saw. He saw that she was afraid, that she was desperate, and that the stubborn pride which upheld her was cracking. He could plainly see that Zebra was more than a home. It was a great burden and a ruthless challenge which she could not or would not ignore. He felt a quick wave of sympathy.

"It would be too much alone, even for a man," he agreed softly. "But with your brother—"

"So you want to see my brother, too!" The girl's voice had turned harsh. "You're new to the Hueco—maybe I can cure you in the beginning. Come in, then. Come in and see what these merciless hills have done to the last of the Candless men! Come in and see why Zebra's fight is mine and mine alone, and why'll I'll stick as long as there hoof or hide of Candless stock on these hills!"

The girl stepped back into the house. Clay hesitated to follow her.

Bert Brennan spoke from the lower step. "Go ahead, Alston," he growled. "You asked for this. But keep your jaw shut. If you say one word—one thing to hurt that girl—"

The man's pause was significant. Clay crossed the veranda and entered the house. It was cool and dim within, filled with heavy,

shadowy furniture and an air of rich, quiet comfort. Melody Candless crossed this main room, traversed a short hall, and flung open a door. It led into an airy south room, set with a great many windows. A bedlike couch was in the center of the floor. A man lay on it, fully clothed, but obviously entirely helpless.

He had apparently been a big man, but he was terribly gaunt, now. There was no movement about his body except for his eyes, which shuttled swiftly to Melody as she followed Clay into the room. Clay recognized the brand of the Candless blood. The man on the couch had an iron-square jaw and the unruly flaming hair of his kind.

"Ray, this is our newest neighbor," the girl said quietly. "Crowding us, like the rest." She turned from her brother. "Raymond Candless—the fourth and the last, Mr. Alston," she said.

She leaned over her brother for a moment, brushing his forehead with her hand, then led the way back out into the hall. When she had closed the door to her brother's room, she leaned against it.

"Complete paralysis," she said impersonally. "A nerve pressure caused by injury. And if you think death is terrible, then you don't know what it means to him lying there day after day, dressed and undressed like a limp doll and fed like a baby. None of my family was born to die flat on his back!"

"An injury—" Clay muttered.

"Yes, an injury!" Melody snapped. "An injury caused by a bullet from the gun of a neighbor. A Packer's lawyer convinced a judge it was an open quarrel and self-defense. But Tracy McGovern never did a more deliberate thing, he was never more sure or more certain, than he was the day he put that bullet into Ray's spine!"

The girl was moving through the house toward the front door again.

"McGovern!" Clay repeated, as he followed her. She stopped on the veranda.

"You said you had something you wished to return?" she suggested.

Clay nodded, swung down the steps to face Bert Brennan. "Yesterday you cut my fence and you left your gun. I brought it back. Last night you and three of your boys jumped one of my new hands and roughed him up badly. You left your watch chain in one of his fists. I brought that back, too!"

Clay pulled Brennan's gun from his waistband and plucked his pocket for the watch chain his rider had carried back to the Hawk. Brennan took both items and looked at them with a stony face. He shoved the gun under his belt and draped the chain across the veranda rail.

"Alston," he said slowly, "don't call me a liar when I'm through talking, because that

is one thing I won't take. But there's something I'm going to tell you. I lost that chain, watch and all, somewhere half a dozen miles from your place, more than a week ago. It is mine, all right. But I have not left the yard here since I got back from my brush with you yesterday afternoon!"

Clay studied Brennan. In spite of the fact that Melody Candles, on the veranda above, was lending silent substantiation to the man's alibi, he was not wholly convinced. But what he had seen and heard here had set a new course of thought at work in his mind. He smiled faintly.

"Brennan, I'm caught in cross-currents here I haven't had time to measure. But I'll make a deal with you. I bought Hawk with no knowledge of how things lay in the Hueco. I have no interest in Zebra, one way or the other. I am my own man with no ties to the Packer's, or to anybody else. I want to let others alone, and be let alone. Nothing else. Take my word for that, and I'll take this story you've told me about your watch."

Brennan slanted a look up at the owner of the Candles ranch. Melody spoke flatly. "A neighbor is the last man I'd trust. You had better get out of the Hueco. This game is for keeps."

Clay shrugged. "I've bought my chips," he said quietly, "and I intend to play them."

Chapter IV

HAWK WILL FIGHT!

HANK DAWSON and three of the new Hawk crew were waiting at the Hawk house when Clay returned in mid-afternoon. They were bunched in the shade of the building, hunkered on their heels. Their horses were heads-down at the rack in front of the porch, saddled and somnolent in the sun. Clay knew before he rode in that something was afoot. Dawson was no loafer, and he was too good a boss to tolerate loafing on the part of his hands. These men were not assigned to work about the home ranch buildings or their mounts would have been unsaddled and in the corral. Dawson stood up and Clay swung down. His weathered face was screwed into a worried frown.

"How many head was in that bunch of heavy cows we run onto the slopes of East Butte, Clay?" he asked.

Alston frowned. "What the devil's the matter with you, Hank?" he snapped. "You bossed that bunch. You ought to know."

Dawson scrubbed dust with his toe. "Sure, but a man can get mixed. And I ain't one to get hasty. Seems as though there ought to be three hundred head."

"Three hundred head is right," Clay agreed.

"And more than half of them should be trailing calves, by now."

Dawson nodded with a sort of grim miserableness. "How are you for a fight against steep-stacked odds, Clay? How much prodding do you take? And the boys have got to know this: does Hawk raise the ante when powder-smoke goes with their beans?"

"Hawk pays any wage that's earned!" Clay growled. "What happened to that bunch on East Butte?"

"It was culled, Clay. About daybreak—cut clean in two. The unborn stuff is still there, but a hundred and twenty head or so, trailing calf, are gone. And every one of them spindle-legs unbranded as yet."

Clay dropped on his haunches, his eyes measuring the crewmen Dawson had brought back to the house with him. Clay knew well enough that it wasn't promise of fighting pay that would hold these men; he knew that his own reaction to this news, his own first steps, would serve as an indication to them of how the rest of it would go. They would judge whatever else was coming by him—even Dawson would do this—and whether or not he would have a crew with which to work depended on these brief moments. Squatting on his heels he swore softly, but without too much feeling. "So they're gone. Then where did they go?"

Dawson squatted down again also and broke a twig between his fingers. A moment of silence ran along. Then Dawson spoke quietly. "Like I said, Clay, I ain't one to make a hasty guess. I don't know."

Alston's brows raised. He waited for Dawson to clear this.

For the first time a small, wry grin touched Dawson's face. "I know which way they were being driven, but not where they finally went. And for a good reason—"

Dawson pulled his hat from his head and ran his fingers through a pair of holes in the crown, front to back.

"We tracked the drive to the Zebra boundary, south of our bottom sections. Zebra had men on their fence. And one of them was mighty handy with a rifle. I figured we'd better skin for home and cut you into this before we got reckless."

Clay scowled heavily. He was remembering his visit to the Candles house. Remembrance of the hard unfriendliness of Melody Candles and Brennan came back to him. So, also, did the grim intention, apparent at the Zebra, to bull through on a set course of action against any odds. It was plain enough that Zebra was hard put for operating cash. Likely the feed problems during a hard season or so in the recent past had forced reduction of Zebra herds to a point where the huge ranch was seriously understocked.

Matured cattle, running under another brand, could be burned over and sold off, but unbranded calves were an easy way to increase a herd and impossible to claim once they'd been iron-marked.

Clay sorted his knowledge of the Candless legend, the big ranch, and the girl who ran it. There had been lawlessness among early members of that flame-headed clan. It had been these who had built much of the legend. And lawlessness could run in the blood of a family. Coupled to this was the strong impression he had received that Melody Candless had a fanatical, passionate regard for Zebra—that there was nothing she would not do to preserve the old ranch from further losses. And in addition, there was her hatred of neighbors, possibly engendered in part by the miserable wound she claimed Tracy McGovern had inflicted on her brother.

These things boiled down into the elements of a bad outfit, rodded by Bert Brennan and staffed by a tough, salty crew. Clay remembered that Brennan had been on the Zebra when he was there, making it virtually impossible for the Candless foreman to have bossed a raid against Hawk. But he remembered, also, that he had seen only half a dozen hands about the home Zebra place and that a spread covering a hundred sections would need a bigger crew than this. A tide of hot anger rose in him.

There had been little enough satisfaction in his talk with Brennan and the Candless girl. But there had been enough sullenness and unreasonable hostility to ruffle his anger. The thought that while he had been talking to Brennan, other Zebra riders had been putting burrs under his saddle, stung deeply.

Dawson, watching his face, began to grin more widely. "There's a lot of potholes, fifty-acre bowls with water in them, south of the piñon ridge cutting through Zebra. Wild country, Clay, and broken to hell, but plenty of cover. I've hunted down that way. I reckon if I was driving stuff with the wrong brand, I'd bunch them down that way till I could work them over. And I reckon a man could cut east around the end of Zebra and come in that way without maybe being pot-shot at by some son with sharp sights on his rifle."

Clay stood up. "How many of our boys'll take that kind of a ride?"

Dawson drew a figure in the dust. "Us four—and you make five. There's four more up on the north meadows. They'll be in before sundown. Two of them you'll have to pay off. That leaves two more—six and yourself, all told."

"And the Zebra tally?"

"Near twenty, I reckon."

"It'll be a nice ride," Clay said softly.

Dawson stood up and rubbed his hands to-

gether. "I figure so," he agreed with a chuckle. "It's time somebody stuck a burr under Zebra's ear. They been kinging this country since I can remember. And it's been a long wait for 'em to bite off more than they can chew!"

"You figure they have?" Clay asked.

Dawson nodded. "I've been waiting for a Texan to ride with and I doubt they've ever tromped one before!"

Clay grinned, then. "They didn't rattle. Neither will we. Get the leather off those horses and corral them. Send one of the boys out on the benches for the four that's out there but don't let wind of what's coming get to the pair we're dropping. I won't pay them off till supper. We'll ride when it's dark. Meanwhile, keep things looking normal around here."

Chapter V

INTO THE TRAP

SUPPER was over but there was still considerable afterglow over the mountains when Clay called the two men Dawson had pointed out into the house. "Hank says you boys are strictly stock-tenders," he said bluntly. "That right?"

The two men nodded. Clay flipped open his check book. "Take your pick out of the saddle cavy, then, and drift your own trail. There's only one string attached. Keep clear of Zebra till we've made our ride tonight."

The spokesman of the pair grinned wryly. "We know where the smoke's blowing from, Alston," he said. "It ain't likely we'll hit Zebra till the spring of the year that hell freezes over. But I've got a buddy over on the Packer's place—McGovern's blacksmith and handyman. I'd admire ridin' that way and bunking there for the night. Any objections?"

Clay shook his head. The two riders pocketed their checks and clumped out of the house. Clay took a pair of heavy guns, .45s on dragoon frames, from a cabinet in the corner. These dragoons were his Texas guns, too heavy for any kind of a ride but that which faced him now. He watched the dying light outside and wiped the matched weapons free of oil.

He heard the two riders bound down to McGovern's place ride out of the yard. Occasionally talk drifted up from the bunkhouse where Hank Dawson and the remaining Hawk crewmen were making their own preparations for the night's work. The talk was not loud; but there was a repressed eagerness, an excitement, which Clay found wholly lacking in himself. A man did not range the wide grass of the *llanos* from boyhood on, sharpening his spurs the hard way, without occasionally

becoming party to a ride such as this. Clay Alston had had his share of these in the past. He had seen men spill blood and he had spilled blood himself. He had seen some good come of such grim business and he had seen a great deal of evil sprout from the same roots.

He had no illusions. Regardless of the justice of their errand, when men rode ready to deal death, death seldom avoided the challenge. Clay was not convinced that this foray against Zebra was right. He was aware that no solid proof existed that the stolen Hawk cattle had been driven by Zebra. The one clear fact, however, was that they had been driven onto Zebra land and that the Zebra boundary had subsequently been defended. He was not even certain that should he and his men find the lost stock, any good could be accomplished against the odds they would then face.

He rode for one paramount reason. Trouble was dark over the Hueco. Alone, faced with the necessity of keeping Hawk rolling, whatever came, he was helpless. He had to retain the nucleus of a crew. And he had ridden other men's grass too long not to know that if he avoided this challenge, Hank Dawson and the five hands who had elected to stick with him would figure him a bow-back and would quit him cold. He wanted his cattle back. He wanted to answer Zebra, if this was a Zebra move. But mostly he wanted to retain his crew against an even greater eventual need.

When dark was full down, Dawson came up through the yard and called to him. Dawson had already saddled his horse for him. The crew was ready, a dark blob of shadows against the star glow along the moonless horizon.

"You know the track?" he asked his foreman. Dawson grunted assent, and Clay swung up and they tracked out of the yard.

For half a mile they held down the county road which eventually led past the Packer's ranch and on into town. Just as they were

about to quit the road to follow the swing of the Hueco south and east, Clay caught a sound and signaled a halt. The sound came plainly, then—a single horse, being ridden at a full run up the road. With his crew about him, Clay waited motionlessly. The rider came thundering on and nearly rode into a Hawk man before he saw the knot of them beside the road. He sawed leather frantically and came up in a skidding halt.

Through the scatter of flying gravel, came Tracy McGovern's blunt voice. "That you, Alston? The devil! I was just jogging over for a talk with you."

Clay snorted in spite of himself. "Damnedest jog I ever saw!" he said dryly. "That horse couldn't have stretched its stride an inch further."

"Oh, that." McGovern laughed. "I've still got a taste for the wind in my face."

Clay nodded, his face expressionless. "So you didn't talk with the two boys I let off tonight and decide maybe you had something to say before I rode out?"

"Two of your boys?" McGovern said. "Why, no. You're letting hands go? You shouldn't do that, Clay! Look, what I wanted to see you about was this: I got my orders from the main office this afternoon. That crate of burned-over brands convinced them, and I've got the go-ahead. Packer's is going to cure that Candless girl or break her. Now, if we threw in together, Clay—"

Alston grunted. "I'll try it alone, first," he said.

"Tonight?"

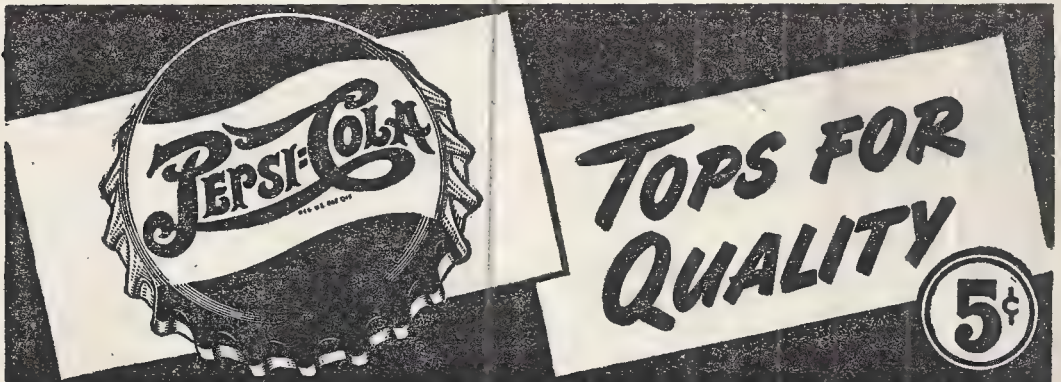
"Tonight!" Clay agreed.

"Good luck, then, Clay," McGovern said, and reined off the way he had come.

Hank Dawson stared thoughtfully after him, a puzzled speculation showing in his voice. "That's funny!" he said.

"Hank," Clay said quietly, "you've got a kink in your sense of humor!" And he giggled his pony on into the night.

Time dragged. Dawson was leading a cir-



cutious, cautious trail, but he seemed to know it well. They forded the Hueco, then forded it twice again in the next half hour. A little later they quitted the river and went up, their course bending constantly to the right so that it changed from east to south of east and then to full south. They were well up into the piñon country when Dawson dropped them into a narrow valley and slanted full west, leading them through a wagon gate and aiming straight into the heart of Zebra's hundred sections.

They came out onto a high bench, lush with graze, and Dawson rode more slowly. Just short of midnight, after half an hour of cutting raggedly back and forth across open country, he hauled up and reined in beside Clay.

"It don't make sense, Boss," he said uneasily. "Nobody'd be fool enough to hold hot stuff any lower than this. The way this country slants, there's only two ways stock could be driven up here. We've cut across both of those draws and there's no sign of a recent drive. Our strays haven't been choused up here—which is the same as saying they ain't on Zebra or they *would* be here. And at the same time, I saw the drive-track head straight across Zebra boundary and these holes in my hat is pretty good proof I wasn't seeing crooked!"

"Dark is a hell of a time to unravel anything, Hank," Clay said quietly. "We've missed what we were driving at. I figure with you, but for a different reason. If Zebra was holding our stuff anywhere near, they'd have guards out and we'd have cut a slice of trouble already. Best thing is to back-track and shake out a new loop tomorrow. We've done what we could for the night. Maybe tomorrow we'll have some better luck."

Dawson nodded reluctant agreement. It was time to skin out.

They started down. The moon came up on them while they were crossing a wide, verdant park.

Almost immediately an eerie cry rose somewhere along the perimeter of hills surrounding the park. Clay judged the cry was supposed to be a coyote's howl though it was very crudely done. He immediately lifted their pace.

"That's a signal," he said. "We'll have to ride this out. And I'm not too sure we haven't been boxed into a pretty neat trap. This may be one night we shall never forget!"

Dawson slid his carbine from under his leg and its action clicked loudly as he slammed a shell into its chamber.

"Damn Zebra!" he swore. "If it is them, we'll have a fat chance of explaining anything!"

Chapter VI

FIRST BLOOD

CLAY'S hunch rapidly proved to be correct. It became increasingly apparent that they had been sighted on the way up and that a force had been mustered to check them on the way out. They could hear riders paralleling them on either flank, crashing along through the brush at a pace which matched their own, but keeping back in the fringe of the timber, from which they could turn any attempt the Hawk bunch might make to veer off to either side. A deep notch, heading a slanted valley, was the road out of the park. Clay's guess was that a heavy ambush awaited them there.

However, there was room to ride. Brush was thin, and the timber did not encroach upon the notch. It seemed to choose the open than the timbered flanks. Clay held his men down to an easy lope and passed orders to them.

"We're riding in a bunch. Maybe we can make them think we haven't heard anything because of our own noise. Ride easy. Don't let them guess we know what we're heading into. Hold it down till the first shot is fired. Then sink your steel and go like hell. I think we can punch through the notch."

"And have the lot of them down on our tails if we do!" Dawson protested.

"I wasn't finished," Clay said. "Every man watch the sides of the notch for muzzle flame. The minute we're below the last gun, I'll signal. When I do, quit leather and grab shelter. If they come down after us, we'll take the steam out of them fast."

Dawson slapped his leg exultantly. "Good-bye, Zebra!" he crowed. "I always said we needed a Texan to barber those Candleless helions!"

The notch was narrowing ahead. Clay barked a warning. A moment later an impatient rider in the timber loosed a shot.

"Now!" Clay cried, and he sank steel to his pony.

The animal shot ahead. Difference in pace and speed broke up the Hawk knot, reducing its effectiveness as a target. And like racing shadows, they plunged into the notch.

Zebra had apparently put the majority of its crew into this trap. Clay wondered if the Candleless riders knew at whom they were shooting or if they were merely firing at trespassers whose identity was of secondary importance. A ragged, searing fire poured into the narrow slot ahead. A bullet passed between the head of Clay's horse and the horn of his saddle with a familiar, uncomfortable sound. Hank Dawson grunted and began to swear in a great bull-voiced bellow, the pounding of the horse under him strangely punc-

tuating the tirade. Glancing aside Clay saw that one of his men was clinging to his horn with both hands, apparently shaken loose in his seat by a bullet. The notch spread out on either side. Shouts were rising with the rifle-fire, now. Clay's eyes marked the rifleman who seemed farthest into the pass. A moment later the man was abreast, then behind.

"Light down!" Clay shouted.

Dawson and four of the Hawk riders slid to a halt and flung down. The fifth, the man who was clinging to his horn, thundered on, apparently unaware of the signal. Clay was concerned for the man, but grateful that it had worked this way. The sound of one man's continuing retreat might cover the dismounting of the rest of them. Giving his horse a slap on the rump to send it clear of the trail, Clay rolled behind a big deadfall log and found Dawson at the other end. Dawson had his carbine leveled across the log. He looked at Clay and passed some signal which was lost in the gloom. Only his chuckle was understandable. Then suddenly, he stiffened. "Here they come!"

ZEBRA, remounted, was pouring through the pass after its quarry. Clay saw Bert Brennan in the vanguard and snapped a shot at him. Light was poor and it was a wide miss. That shot was a signal for his own men to open fire. It was good, steady shooting and Zebra halted in the face of it. Clay began to feel exultation. But Zebra did not turn and break back up through the pass as he had expected. Instead, Brennan bellowed orders and Zebra holed up, too.

Clay swore. He had forgotten to count on the sullen, inflexible stubbornness of Zebra, the stubbornness of the Candleless blood.

"We'd better start working back. We'd better get out of here," Dawson suggested.

"Pass the word," Clay agreed.

The withdrawal began slowly and picked up speed as the range increased. It became apparent that either Zebra did not realize it was in progress or that the Candleless crew had had enough. Clay began to feel easier again. But this didn't last, either. A sudden beat of rifle fire from dead behind them winked against the dark hills. Clay heard another Hawk man exclaim loudly in the dark, as though hit. This new attack was more savage than the one in the notch, and was apparently backed by more men.

"I thought you guessed twenty hands on Zebra!" Clay snapped at Dawson.

The foreman grunted. "I don't get this, Clay. There must be twenty behind us!"

"We're not counting them," Clay answered. "Bunch the boys and forget the horses. We'll work up the slope and cut across for home

afoot. We've lost our hair this time. Next time we'll do better. Get the others to start off. You and I'll keep smoke burning till they're on their way."

Dawson wriggled off, and presently Clay heard the bang of his carbine from a rock thirty yards away. No other Hawk guns were firing. Dawson slammed out shots as fast as he could load and lever his weapon. Clay loaded, fired, and reloaded his dragoons with a steady rhythm, dividing his shots between the party in the notch and that spread across the trail below. Dawson quit firing directly and Clay judged Hank figured the others now had enough of a start. Clay worked back from his log, shuttled to another shelter, then rose and ran in swift silence up the north slope at his back. He came on Dawson and three Hawk men hunkered over the prostrate form of the fourth on the summit of the slope.

"It's Ed Phelps, gut-shot by those sons from behind. The boys dragged him this far. . . ."

Dawson looked up appealingly. Clay dropped down beside the prone man. He straightened in a moment.

"He's dead," he said. "We can't carry him in afoot. The rest of you skin on for the home place. I'll scout for a horse and bring Phelps in. Now, what about the lad that held on when we lit down—Bane, wasn't it?"

"Jerry Bane," Dawson nodded. "He's all right. Got an arm gouge, near's I could make out. I was riding beside him when he was tagged. If he got through that bunch that was waiting for us below, he'll be at the house waiting when we get there."

Clay nodded. "Drift, then," he ordered. "If I'm not in by two hours after sunup with Phelps, better come out with a wagon. There'll be two of us to haul in. But give me that much time."

Hank Dawson made a sign waved in agreement and with the three dismounted riders flanking him plunged down the slope ahead, driving overland for the distant Hawk.

Chapter VII

MELODY SETS THE TUNE

CLAY crouched beside the dead rider on the summit of the ridge until the sound of Dawson's and the three others died out down the slope. In the other direction, down in the canyon leading out of the notch, there was considerable movement. Clay sifted the sounds rising to him. The bunch which had come up from behind and had so neatly trapped the Hawk made no apparent effort to join those who had been stationed in the notch. This lower bunch milled a little. Someone called out orders. Men mounted, and pres-

ently the bunch turned and rode down the valley in the direction from which they had apparently come—away from the notch.

Clay frowned at this. Riding down the valley was not the most direct route to Zebra headquarters. It would seem that, inasmuch as the intruders onto Zebra had been roundly beaten and routed, there was no need for further roundabout maneuvers. The night's work was finished and this failure of the two Candless parties to unite puzzled him.

When the lower bunch was gone, his attention centered on the others, those who had been in the notch. They appeared to be milling uncertainly and it was evident that Clay's own men had exacted a price from the ambush into which they had ridden. Directly Clay started afoot back down the slope. Presently he could hear movement about him and a few moments later he sighted three horses, heads-down in a little clearing of brush.

He felt heavily tired and there was the dead man on the ridge. He needed two of these animals. He angled toward them. Dawn was cresting the east, making for better light, but it was difficult distinguishing between substance and shadow, even now. He was almost upon the animals before he spotted the dim figure guarding them.

Impatient as he was, he forced himself to caution and came up silently. The guard had no intimation of danger until Clay smashed into his back, silencing him with a hand clamped over his mouth and catching both his arms up behind him with the other. Ordinarily a man hit hard like this with surprise and pinioned helplessly is inclined to give over struggling abruptly. But not so this horse guard. The figure threshed violently in Clay's grip. The mouth worked and strong teeth sank into his palm. He jerked his hand away and was on the point of driving in a hard and silencing fist when he saw the face.

Melody Candless had been watching the horses!

Recognition came almost simultaneously to the girl. Her mouth was open to cry out alarm. It remained open for a moment, but no sound issued from her.

"You!" she gasped. "Clay Alston!"

"Me," Clay agreed stonily. "Your massacre didn't work—completely."

"Massacre?" the girl repeated. "Then it was you—you and your riders—who were up in the piñons?"

Clay sensed a heaviness, a disappointment in her voice. It seemed almost as though an earlier elation had died in this moment. He nodded. Melody Candless ran a hand wearily over a face stained with hard riding and very white in the thin light.

"Then it's no good—none of it!" she said dully.

"You cut my crew down by one man dead, maybe two. And three others were so spooked I had to let them go. That ought to amount to something. That's at least a part of what you wanted, isn't it?"

Melody turned on him. "You and your crew!" she said tensely. "What do I care about them? What do they mean in this? Nothing! Nothing, so long as they stay out of my way. If you've lost men, I'm sorry. It wasn't intended."

"No?" Clay was unconvinced. "Then what was intended? This was a set trap. What did you aim to catch in it?"

"You're blind!" Melody snapped. "You're a grass man—you should have been able to see that I'm trying to trap Tracy McGovern and his Packer's bunch before Packer's swallows what's left of the empire my grandad staked in these hills. What's a pebble like your little Hawk when the fight's between the Packer's and what's left of the Candless Zebra!"

"You aimed to catch Tracy McGovern, here?" Clay was incredulous. "You claim a war with him? And what makes you think you might have found McGovern up in your piñons tonight?"

Melody Candless looked a long time at him. "I'd like to figure you completely, Clay Alston," she said. "I'd like to know which way your shadow lies. But I haven't the time. I don't know that this is any of your business, and I don't know that McGovern hasn't bought you or sold you on his way of thinking. But I'll tell you why I thought we had him, tonight. Before dawn this morning he opened a gate above the Hueco ford and drove a hundred and fifty or two hundred head of cattle onto the Zebra. Seeing as it was a dawn drive and traveling fast, the stock likely wasn't Packer's stuff. Even McGovern isn't crazy enough to run his hides in where I could lay my hands on them. So this must have been stolen stuff, driven in to be planted for evidence on Zebra graze.

"A line rider found signs of the drive right after daybreak and Brennan posted guards along the river line, but it was too late, then, of course. A little later some riders tracked the drive to within rifle-shot of our gate, but Bert was fuming mad and he drove them off without even trying to find out who they were. Meanwhile we tracked the drive, but McGovern took it across a trackless old lava flow which angles down across the Packer's-Zebra boundary, and we lost it. There were only two places it could have gone—into our piñon breaks or back down across the lava to the Packer's again. Knowing how badly McGovern has been wanting to tag Zebra, the best bet was that the stolen herd and the Packer's riders chousing it were up in our

piñons and that the riders would leave the stock there and try to double for home after nightfall tonight. That's why the trap."

The girl stopped, her lips compressed tightly. Anger made her eyes smoky. Suddenly they cleared and she stabbed a hard look at Clay. "Which makes all of my share of this talk. I'll hear yours, now! Why were you and your boys three miles deep into Zebra on a moonless night?"

Clay answered quietly. "Trailing a hundred and fifty or two hundred head of our best stuff, a lot of it unmarked as yet, that was driven through your gate above the Hueco

ford sometime before dawn this morning!"

"Then you're on to Tracy McGovern, too!" Melody Candless breathed. "Maybe Zebra has got a neighbor it can trust, after all. I—I hope so—Clay!"

THE girl's relief was almost desperate, as though she could now share a burden which had become intolerable to her. Clay wanted to give her an unrestrained answer, complete assurance. He wanted to fan friendliness alive between himself and this girl, regardless of the respective stands of the Hawk, the Zebra, and the Packer's. But he could not avoid re-

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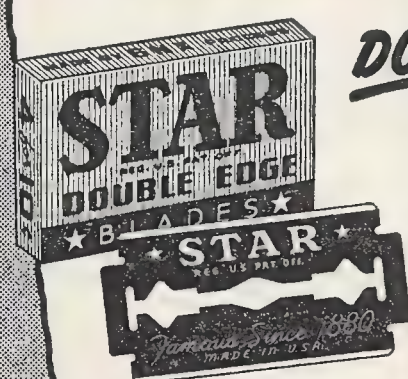
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membering that this girl was so fanatical in her love for the family ranch that she could be as dangerously deceptive as she could be disarmingly frank. And an inner honesty made him check the first impulse which struck him.

"Maybe we're neighbors," he agreed carefully, "but I'm sold only this far. I'm certain a large chunk of my herds have been run off. I know those cattle were run onto Zebra. It's possible they may have been run on down onto Packer's, because after my ride through these hills tonight I'm pretty certain they're not up in your pifions. But I'm not convinced this was McGovern's work and I'd admire knowing what makes you so sure it is."

The girl answered vehemently. "If you'd swallowed face-slappings and crowding by Tracy McGovern! If you'd seen your brother coolly shot down, and then had the man who shot him ride into your yard the next day with an insolent offer from Packer's to buy Zebra at a ridiculous price! Then you'd know, as I do, that whatever happens to Zebra is not bad luck but Tracy McGovern, acting on his orders from Kansas City. But if you need better proof, I'll give it to you."

"When you know McGovern better, you'll realize he's vain. One of his vanities is that he smokes factory cigarettes—long ones with a stamped design. And he's the only man in this country that thinks so little of it that he'll throw a live smoke away in this tinder grass without first grinding it out. When you get to know him that well you'll realize what it means when I tell you that my men found five such cigarette stubs, the stamped designs plain upon them, along the track of this herd driven through our gate above the ford!"

Clay considered this. The whole matter was plain evidence of one of two things. Either Melody Candles was a liar par excellence, a cool and ruthlessly thorough woman who fully understood the value of playing two enemies against each other, or the whole situation on the Hueco was altogether different than he had supposed it to be. He found himself thinking carefully of Tracy McGovern. And he was surprised to discover that the easy, ingratiating friendliness in McGovern which had at first attracted him so strongly now seemed put-on, insincere.

"Well, Clay?" Melody said, and Clay looked up.

"I'll think on this," he said. "I don't know—"

The girl shrugged. "What you think will make little difference, in the end."

"If it is McGovern and not Zebra behind this trouble," Clay suggested, "then you think you're strong enough to break the Packer's?"

"No, not the Packer's. I can't reach from here to Kansas City. The Zebra's thousands

run to acres, not money. And McGovern has too neatly hamstrung us, already. But I'll break Tracy McGovern and I'll make the Packer's remember a long time what it cost them to break the last of the Candles!"

The girl sucked in a long breath. "You were pussyfooting when you came down the slope. You were after a horse?"

"Two," Clay said. "I've got a dead hand on top the ridge and I want to haul him home."

The girl stepped away from the horses beside which she had been standing. "Take your pick. Send them back tomorrow—as far as the boundary fence on the Hueco. One of my men will be there steady, from now on!"

"Then it's the beginning—between you and McGovern?"

"No, it's nearer the end—thank God!"

With this, she swung up on the third horse, leaving Clay standing in the fading darkness beside the other two animals.

Chapter VIII

HAWK AGAINST PYTHON

ALSTON arrived at the Hawk with Ed Phelps' body before the sun had brightened enough to drive dew mists out of the deep bottoms. Dawson and the riders afoot had not yet come in off of the ridges. But a blown, weary horse stood head down on the sunny side of the bunkhouse, ground-tied and content enough to rest there. Clay noticed a bruised friction burn on the animal's off shoulder.

Remembering the rider who had been hit in the saddle, the rider who had plowed on through the lower portion of Zebra's ambush when the rest of the Hawk lit down for a stand, Clay shoved into the bunkhouse. The rider, Jerry Bane, was stretched on his bunk. A clumsy piece of bandaging, apparently dish-toweling purloined from the kitchen, swathed his left forearm. His face had the pallor of a man who had come through a bad night and who had lost some blood, but he did not seem seriously hurt. He awakened at Clay's step and sat up awkwardly with a wry grin of relief and welcome on his face. He recognized concern in Clay's eyes and waved his bandaged arm.

"A nick. Couldn't tell how it was in the night—it bled like a fountain—but I'm all right, now. We was boxed in proper, Boss!"

"We were," Clay agreed. "Phelps was killed. I just brought him in. The rest are afoot. But Phelps and the tag you got and the horses we lost in the dark is the total. That Candles trick of splitting the Zebra party above and below us should have wiped us out. It didn't. And maybe Zebra has learned a little lesson!"

Jerry Bane scowled. "Zebra?" he protested. "You talk like all that last night was Zebra, Clay. You didn't find out, then? Listen, I rode clean through that bunch below us. And somewhere along the way I bounced the shoulder of my pony off a broom-tailed pinto in the dark. Know who was sitting saddle on it? *Tracy McGovern!* That lower bunch was Packer's boys, to a man. McGovern and his crew out against us and siding the Candleless girl. It don't make sense, but it's fact!"

"You're sure—about McGovern?"

"Dead sure."

Clay grunted. "The hell it doesn't make sense!" he said quietly. "We've been neatly baited into a war—on the wrong side of the fence!"

Bane scowled, perplexed. "I don't get it."

"I've turned down the wrong neighbor," Clay explained shortly. Then, as though this was a full and complete explanation: "That arm cripple you, Jerry? No? Then maybe you'd give me a hand. I've got Phelps across a saddle out here. We'll load him in the buckboard. When the other boys get in, one of them can wheel him into town."

Bane followed him outside. They lifted the body of the dead man down, placed it in the buckboard, and laced a tarp over it. Bane followed Clay as far as the porch of the main house, plainly hoping for further explanations. Clay was aware of that hope, but he wanted to think before he talked further. He wanted to think hard. He wanted to line out the situation on the Hueco as it actually existed, not as it had been cleverly made to appear to him. . . .

Clay had roused out his cook and breakfast was hot on the stove when Hank Dawson and the footsore trio with him reached the ranch. Despite the constant probing of Jerry Bane's eyes, Clay was silent throughout the meal. When it was done, he asked Dawson into his office. Bane filed out with the other men and Clay knew he would acquaint the others with the situation now facing their boss. Clay knew that later in the day he would have to call the crew into the office, also. He would have to have a plan, then. He would have to let the boys know how Hawk was going to stand. And he would have to let each of them choose once more whether they would stick against these increasing odds or whether they would drift with their skins whole. He wished to postpone this. Prospects of peace and forty-and-found were rapidly vanishing on the Hueco.

Dawson, chewing at one of Clay's cigars, listened quietly while Clay detailed his talk with Melody Candleless and gave him the information Bane had brought home with him. When Clay finished, Dawson leaned slowly forward, his weathered face twisted wryly.

"I reckon the meanest chore a man ever has to do," he said, "is to 'fess up to a whopping mistake. That's what I'm doing. Likely you are, too. And there's only one thing makes it anywhere near easy. That is, that a lot of others have jumped into the same hole and it ain't too late to do something about it!"

"What?" Clay asked bluntly.

Dawson bit deeply into the cigar. "Fight!" he answered tersely.

"Fight Packer's?" Clay prodded. "That's the biggest outfit north of Texas and south of Montana."

"To hell with that!" Dawson growled. "The higher the horse the harder the fall. That curly son of a McGovern has got the whole blasted county thinkin' a gal that maybe ain't no-ways deservin' the name is an out-and-out she-devil. He's made ridin' for her so plain unhealthy she can't hire nothing but sand-burrs and flint-skinned tumbleweeds. And right off in the beginning he picked a fight with her brother and put him out of the game so's she wouldn't have no kin to back her. He took me in, and I don't like bein' took that way!"

ALSTON sucked in a deep breath of relief. Hank, able and unhurried, was respected by the rest of the crew. What he said, in the main, they would stick by. And Hank had delivered this ultimatum against McGovern without knowing Clay's own position. In fact, he had been arguing for a fight, and the devil with his boss' intentions!

Clay leaned forward, his relief and his eagerness plain in his face, but before he could say anything the veranda door of the office opened and Tracy McGovern stood framed in the opening.

Behind McGovern Clay could see the silhouettes of two Packer's riders. Back of them, standing in the clear and out in the full sunshine, were Jerry Bane and two of the Hawk men. The third had apparently rolled the buckboard bearing Phelps' body out toward town. The Hawk men were grim-faced. Bane's good right hand was on the butt of his gun. The others were tense, watching and waiting, and Clay grinned.

"We were talking about you, Tracy," he said.

McGovern's face was dark, his eyes narrowed. "Yeah," he agreed shortly. "I heard, and it was damned fool talk, Clay! You can measure odds. You're out of this, and you know it. Sow the wind, Clay, and you reap the—"

"The whirlwind," Clay cut in. "Sure, I know that. But you're applying it the wrong way. It's you that's been planting—not me!"

McGovern smiled without humor. "So we disagree," he said. "It was coming. It was

down in the book. You moved in here fast, ahead of me. I was watchin' Zebra and let this stuff you took up slide. But my orders were to get it, too, and I will. When that Candleless wench buckles, I tackle you. Packer's have been after the hundred Candleless sections for ten years. But being a big outfit, it's had to go slow, planting a lot of stuff against Zebra before we plowed in. You being here, walkin' chesty, makes it just that much easier. We'll clean the whole damned Hueco and when we're through we can claim and make it stick that the whole thing was plain a three-legged range war with you and the Zebra making most of the smoke."

"Then Melody Candleless isn't what most of the county figures she is? And Zebra isn't running burned brands?"

McGovern laughed shortly. "Melody Candleless is as straight as a string. The Candleless tribe have been a little wild, but that's all. They've been as honest as a minted eagle and they built Zebra the hard way. The girl is the same kind. But count that out, Clay. I'm not building the Hueco spread for the Packer's for nothing. I'm not building it for my pay, even. That girl turned me down once and I didn't like the way she did it. I aim to have her, when it's all done!"

Clay stood up. "McGovern," he said softly, "when a man uses his fists or his gun or even his brains, I can see where a fight is fair and I'll tangle him on his own odds, taking the breaks and giving them. But when he uses lies, and a woman—!"

McGovern backed up a step in the doorway. "The fight hasn't come yet, Clay," he said icily. "You can't make one now because I won't take it. You got burned last night—hard, I hope, and deep. I got a letter from headquarters today. They know what you've sunk in this place. They'll take you out of it with a cold five thousand dollar profit—a quick cash deal. You can light someplace else—so long as it's out of this State—just five thousand dollars up the ladder."

Clay shook his head. "No, Tracy," he said softly. "When I climb the ladder, it'll be my own way. And now get out of here. Get off of Hawk. I'm paying a bounty on Packer's scalps found inside my fence, starting at noon today!"

McGovern shrugged and backed on through the doorway. He seemed wholly undisturbed. "For every thousand dollars in buy-out prices I save my outfit, they pay me three hundred. You're making me rich, Clay."

"You can't spend it underground!" Clay snapped. "And Tracy—one more thing. I seem to have misplaced about two hundred head, mostly in young, unmarked stuff. It'd be handy if your boys should run across those cattle and have them inside my gate at the

ford by sunset. If they don't, I reckon I'll have to go hunting for them!"

McGovern shot a hard, anticipatory glance at Clay, then laughed again. "Suppose you do that," he suggested, then wheeled and clumped down the steps. His two riders followed him. Bane and the two Hawk men spread a little in the yard, watchful and alert. McGovern shot them an angry glance, muttered something to his two boys, and the three of them rode swiftly out of the yard. Hank Dawson came out on the veranda and stood beside Clay. When McGovern had forded the Hueco below the house he turned, rubbing his hands together with bland pleasure.

"Man!" he breathed. "Oh, man! I'd rather hunt that kind of snake than the biggest buck that ever hit the benches!"

A similar thought was in Clay, but it was tempered by arithmetic, a cold analysis of the combined strength of the Hawk and the Zebra as pitted against a python whose head was as distant as Kansas City and whose body and strength were so enormous that no one rightly knew their full limits.

Chapter IX

ZEBRA WILL FIGHT ALONE

THE rider who had taken Ed Phelps' body into town returned shortly before noon. Clay heard Hank Dawson briefly and graphically describing McGovern's visit to the man. Presently the two of them came on into the office.

"Brindle's got a report, Clay," Hank announced.

"You saw the sheriff?" Clay asked the rider.

"No," Brindle said uncomfortably. "The sheriff's on vacation."

"At Kansas City?" Clay suggested shrewdly.

Brindle looked surprised. "So his deputy said. I tried to stir us up a little fire, but I didn't get over the first strand of the fence. This deputy's Fred Galvin—used to be a hand at McGovern's till a bad fall a couple years back busted his leg too much for riding. Been hanging around town at one thing and another, ever since. He fetched up the coroner—Doc Sawyer, and drunk as usual. Him and Doc had a parley and wrote out a death certificate on Ed. 'Accidental death in pursuit of normal business,' they wrote. 'Exact cause unknown.' Unknown, hell!"

Brindle swore softly. "Ed was a good partner," he went on. "I stopped at Freeman's Mercantile and stocked us up half a case of brass shells. Figure I recollected the bore-sizes on every piece we got. And I charged 'em to you, Alston. We fight, don't we?"

Clay nodded, and Dawson spat. "Yeah," Dawson said. "We fight, all right—without the law, betwixt the devil and the high blue butte, and all on our lonesome!"

"Maybe not, Hank," Clay cut in. "Put the boys to riding fence and see that they've got long guns under their saddles. Then bring up a couple of horses. You and I are going recruiting."

"To Hueco?" Hank growled. "Thunderation, Clay, McGovern will have snapped up every man idle in town long ago!"

"No, not to Hueco," Clay murmured. "To Zebra!"

A MAN Clay did not know was on guard duty at the Zebra fence above the Hueco ford. He eyed the approach of the two riders uneasily, but beyond a challenging gesture, made no attempt to stop them until they were within ten yards of the gate. Then he jerked his side gun.

"It's no go, Alston!" he warned. "This gate is tight closed. And I've got plain orders. I'll empty your saddle if you come closer."

The man was flatly in earnest, and Clay was aware that he would carry out his orders. Still, it was necessary to get by him.

"I rode this way to talk with the boss of Zebra," he said. "I've got no feelings against you, but I don't aim to talk Zebra business with a hand, either. You might be lucky and empty one saddle, but there's two of us. You've got your orders. I'll give Dawson, here, his if necessary."

The man shook his head stubbornly. Clay could see but one way to pass him. He made a full, obvious turn toward Hank as though to snap a command at him. The guard on the gate automatically swung his attention to Dawson, and as he did, Clay's turn became a peculiar hunching thing, out of which his gun flashed upward. The guard saw his mistake too late. He tried to jerk his gun back into line on Clay, but Clay fired in that instant.

The guard grunted, dropped his gun, and

clutched with his free hand at an ugly, shallow tear across his forearm. With the sound of Clay's piece Hank quit his saddle in a flying leap. He vaulted the fence beside the gate at full stride, kicked the guard's gun aside, and pinioned the stunned man as he began a belated dive for it.

Clay rode forward, lifted the hoop over the fixed post of the gate, and rode through, deliberately closing the gate behind him. He flipped a clean kerchief from his breast pocket and watched while Hank deftly wrapped it around the man's torn arm.

"There's some lads should not come through this gate," he said. "It should remain guarded. If you'll take my word that I'm going straight to the Zebra house for a talk with Miss Candless and then straight back out the way we've come in, I'll hand you back your iron and you can stay on the job. If not, you'll go in with us and I'll tell Melody Candless just how easily you were tricked into letting us past."

The man stared stubbornly for a long moment. Finally the stubbornness began to fade. A small, sheepish grin momentarily touched his lips.

"That's a white offer, Alston," he agreed. "It ain't often a man can pull his head out of a tossed loop that easy. I'll take it. But if you raise one single pint of hell at the ranch house or bear down on Miss Candless—"

Clay nodded, and Dawson picked up the guard's gun and handed it back to him. Then they rode on together.

A man in the yard spotted the approach of the two men from Hawk and passed the word. Bert Brennan and a flanking of Zebra riders were waiting along the rail of the house porch when the intruders rode up. They were as truculent as before.

"Your luck won't hold forever, Alston!" Brennan snapped. "You were told before that we don't want neighbors—not inside our boundaries. You clearing out peaceably?"

"I reckon," Clay agreed. "I came that way."

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"Like hell!" Brennan growled. "You came up from the river. I've had a guard on that gate twenty-four hours a day. I know every damn' thing that happens!"

"He's still there. Winged a little, but in good enough shape to block a Packer's party. Look, Brennan, this is all right. A man has got to bow his back in a tight. And when's he working for the kind of a boss you are—when he's bucking odds that'd break most men's hearts—he's got to shove his sand to the surface and keep it there. I've got my own respect for the way you've backed Miss Candles against all comers, but you've figured me wrong, boots to hatband!"

"I doubt that!" Brennan answered swiftly. "The whole blamed county has been gunning for Zebra since Miss Candles took it over. And you're county."

Clay shook his head. "No. I'm Hawk. And since sunset last night, I've opened my eyes pretty wide. I've tagged Tracy McGovern, for one thing."

"And that's not all, Brennan," Hank Dawson tossed in. "He not only figured McGovern cold, but he tossed him off the Hawk this morning with some pretty unpleasant talk. Clay'll do to listen to."

"McGovern would trick his own left hand if he could see profit in it!" Brennan insisted stubbornly. "The way he tried to wipe out you boys last night and make it look like it was two bunches of our own lads is proof enough of that. The hell with the way a man looks and the way he sounds. If he's from off Zebra, he's against us. I'm turning from there. Alston, you and Hank work tail or we'll push this right through—and now!"

Brennan shot a side look at the men flanking him. They clearly understood. A hard tension built up, based wholly on Brennan's stubbornness, but dangerous enough for all of that. Clay eyed the Zebra men flatly, fully aware that his time was rapidly running thin. When all of them, Hawk and Zebra both, were drawn taut and there was little more waiting, Clay tried his bid once more.

"I told your lad at the gate that I don't talk Zebra business with a hand. That goes for you, too, Brennan. I want to see Melody—"

The door in back of Brennan opened then, and Melody Candles came out onto the porch. "All right Bert," she said. "Start talking, Clay Alston!"

UNDER this blunt invitation, Clay rapidly sketched what he had discovered about Tracy McGovern and his plans. And he wound up with an open, honest plea for co-operation between Hawk and Zebra.

"Either one of us are too small to buck the Packer's," he said. "But together we'd

still be too small, except that we'll be braced behind our own fences. And that adds to this: I told McGovern to have the stuff he ran off from me, the stuff he angled across your piñon slopes before he holed them up on his own grass, back on Hawk by sunset or I'd come after them. He won't move. It's a good cause—we should throw together on it. But instead of driving for my cattle, we'll plow straight into McGovern's headquarters. If there's a stand made, we'll touch torches and burn the place to the ground. If there's no stand, we'll take McGovern. That alone will cure the head office of Packer's. A big outfit, watching its name, will crowd as far as its toughest hand will go. After that it'll pull in its horns. It's our one and only chance, believe me!"

Melody listened carefully. She was standing erect and proud, the sun slanting under the eaves of the veranda striking her strongly, emphasizing her beauty and her determination. Clay thought that no woman should look like this. There should be room in any woman's life for softness and lights more gentle than midday sun. There ought to be problems which bore no overtone of violence. And there ought to be enough peace for the flowering of her beauty.

Melody looked long at Clay, then turned toward Brennan. "Well, Bert?" she asked in an obvious plea for advice, and Brennan's shoulders hunched.

"Alston's said it: that what he proposes is the one chance—to save his beef! I tell you, Melody, me and the boys are with you till the last dog is hung. You know that. Be we aren't called on to believe every smooth-talking son Tracy McGovern sends in here. And we aren't called on to skin our hides to save Alston's beef. If he wants that stolen stuff back, let him go after it. We'll pick our fights when McGovern comes inside *this* fence!"

"You and the boys have stuck by me, Bert," Melody said. "I'll stick by you, now. That's our answer, Clay."

Clay nodded. Argument could not go beyond this. "Wish us luck, Melody," he said. "If it runs good, maybe I'll be back tomorrow with news that'll please you."

Brennan, heartened by the girl's support, thrust his head forward.

"We should get this plain and complete, right now, Alston!" he snapped. "You're hard to sell. When the prodding's done and we can work stock and nothing else, Zebra's gates will open easy to anybody. But until then, the only way you'll get in here is on a board or the bottom of a buckboard. That goes!"

Clay glanced up at Melody but she had already turned and was stepping through the dodrway into the house. He knew that Melody

would have welcomed a Hawk alliance. He knew that she wanted to send Brennan and her crew with him. But he knew, also, that she was afraid. Hungry as she was for friendliness, her abiding love for Zebra would not let her accept his offer for fear a softness within herself would betray the ranch she had fought so grimly to retain. It reduced his own plans to wreckage and made his own ultimatum to McGovern no more than a brash bid for destruction. But he could not blame her. He turned wearily to Brennan.

"All right, Bert," he said. "But if I muff this tonight, tomorrow it will be ten times worse for Zebra. You sounded off on loyalty. By hell, you'd better stick to that girl, no matter how rough the going gets!"

"I will, Alston," Brennan promised grimly.

Clay nodded at Dawson, and they remounted and turned back toward Hawk.

Chapter X

SEND PACKER'S PACKING!

FIVE men sat at early supper in the Hawk kitchen. Clay's cook, sensing the pressure against the crew, had outdone himself. Still none of them ate. Clay idled with his food, and there was little talk.

Dawson had the best grip on himself. "We won't get that stock back," he said simply, "but I don't care a damn about that. All I want is to get in close enough to tag a Packer's man with every load in the chamber of my short gun. I can see a man who'd steal for himself. But one that'd steal for hire and pick a woman for his goat—!"

Bane grinned faintly. "I'll bet you my new saddle I get a scalp for every one you do, Hank," he offered.

It was an attempt at chaff, but it hid nothing. Clay knew he was taking his four boys out to die and the knowledge was unsettling. He nodded a few minutes after sundown and the others rose with him from the table. It was a hard ride ahead; and delaying it would not make it easier.

However, in figuring the odds and the ride, Clay had not accurately measured Tracy McGovern. As he stepped from the kitchen into the yard, dust on the section road drew his attention. A buckboard was rolling swiftly along the track, accompanied by two or three more than a dozen riders. The cavalcade was moving at a purposeful clip. Hank Dawson stared at it, then stepped back into the house for a pair of glasses. He studied the road with these for a moment, then lowered them.

"That's Fred Galvin in the buckboard, Clay," he said quietly. "He ain't wearing his deputy's badge, so I reckon this ain't official. Fred's a special kind of a shot with a rifle.

It ain't surprising he's with that bunch. The rest of them is mostly drifters I don't know, but there's three faces off the Packer's that I'm sure of."

"McGovern's figuring on aching us out, then?" Clay murmured. "He's aiming to wind it up right here?"

Dawson nodded. "It looks that way, Clay."

Alston turned and spoke quietly to the men on the veranda. "We've got a little time. Get



Clay rode straight for the flames.

a saddle horse for each of us, rigged and waiting in that cottonwood bosque back of the house. It can't be seen from the road. And get the guns and ammunition up here at the house. McGovern's made a mistake. He's sent a hired hand to do what would be a tough chore for him in person. We'll risk our luck, boys. We'll see how sharp Hawk's claws are filed!"

The crew scattered, and Clay watched the oncoming party. Before it wheeled into the lower end of the yard, the boys were back from their errands and the house was closed tight. Galvin, issuing orders from his buckboard, scattered his men. Clay saw oil tins in the hands of two or three.

"Kerosene!" he breathed. "Spill those boys first—puncture those cans. Then we'll go to work on the rest!"

Flanking a window, Dawson jerked up his rifle, poked out a pane of glass with its muzzle, and began leveling for a running shot. At this moment Jerry Bane touched Clay's arm and drew him to a south window. There, across the river and rising above the bench below the piñon ridges, a glow which was not of the sunset was bright against the darker hills.

"That's Zebra," Bane said. "Outbuildings, I'd judge, by the quick way they're burning."

Clay nodded, wheeling on Dawson at the window. "Hold it, Hank! We've been tricked. Here's why we draw Galvin and the second-

rates. McGovern and the bulk of his bunch are at the Candleless place, likely at the same tricks as these boys down here. Slide out the back way, quick and quiet. I had you put horses out there to get some of you out of here if this thing went wrong. They'll do to take us south."

Dawson backed from the window in astonishment. "Clay, you confounded fool!" he protested. "Hell, Galvin and this bunch will have everything you own climbing up in smoke in five minutes if we pull out of here. Hawk'd be a devil of a place without a roof on it!"

"Hawk is new. It can be built up again. But the Candleless place is old and could never be put back the same. I've broken my heart to build up this place, but Melody Candleless' people started breaking their hearts for three generations before she was born, building up Zebra. We've got to save that for her!"

Dawson shook his head, as the others held back. "All right, then, look at it this way," Clay argued. "McGovern isn't here. He's on Zebra with the rest of his bunch. And McGovern is what we want!"

The boys blinked, saw the truth in this, and headed for the back door. By the time they were in saddle and circling to cross the Hueco, high enough to avoid detection, they saw the first flames wink to life among the buildings they had deserted. There was no pursuit, no alarm. Galvin had come upon a deserted ranch, and was torching it. He had no inkling that it had been vacated under his nose.

THE fire on the Zebra was a powerful magnet. Clay communicated some of his urgency to his companions so that the five of them rode in a hard, compact knot, driving straight toward the flames without attention to terrain, trails, or footing. As he rode Clay tried to tell himself that the drive prodding him was his desire to close with McGovern; to choke off the ambition of the Packer's and their foreman before his own land was swallowed. He tried to tell himself that he was riding only for himself.

But he couldn't make it stick. A picture of Melody, watching the flames eat into the fine old buildings her family had been so long in raising, tormented him unbearably. He could feel her desperation, the certainty in her that after tonight there would no longer be a Candleless Grant, a Candleless ranch, a domain which had sired proud men and prouder women. That picture and that feeling flagged him on. Melody had made her battle with every ounce of courage in her slim body. It was not right that she should lose it.

He halted his men at the fringe of the piñons back of the main house. Fire had not yet been touched to it. Some of the smaller buildings

near the corral were already tumbled infernos. And Bert Brennan's boys, outnumbered by the Packer's crew, were making a stubborn, withdrawing fight which had its magnificence but which could in the end only delay the inevitable.

A small party appeared to be in the main house, which was now suffering the heaviest attack. Others of the Zebra crew were forted up below the corral in a log wagon-shed which offered some shelter. Clay pointed out this shed.

"Get down that way the best you can," he told Dawson. "See if you can pry those boys free. Then the bunch of you start working back up across the yard. Maybe we can break this before they get the house, too."

"And you, Clay?" Hank asked.

Clay pointed to scurrying figures shuttling across the yard. "McGovern's down there. I aim to find him!"

Dawson and the boys branched off afoot. Also afoot, Clay cut straight into the open, running easily and with his eyes on the shifting knot of Packer's men flinging repeated attacks against the front of the house. For long seconds he was not seen. A man paused to watch him, seemed almost convinced he was one of the attackers, then bellowed sudden alarm. Some of those in front of the house laced a hot fire at Clay, making him break stride and dive behind the cordwood stacked on the edge of the woodlot.

Another man was behind the shelter. Clay was aware of his presence by smell before he saw him. The vague, bodyless odor of blood hung close to the grass. The man lay face down. Clay rolled him over, his fingers turning swiftly gentle when he realized the fellow was all but shot in two. He still breathed, however. The face, turned up, was highlighted by the glow of the fire. The man was Bert Brennan.

Brennan's eyes opened. He stared at Clay. He tried twice before he could form words. "You're a—stubborn son—Alston!" he wheezed. "They—hit you—too?"

Clay nodded. "Thought I saw—fire your way," Brennan went on. "My luck—got me the first volley! Reckon I was wrong—about you. Melody—to hell with the house! Melody—McGovern wants her. Don't let him—"

Brennan choked up. A heavy crash sounded across the yard. Clay lifted. Firing from within the house had ebbed. He thought Dawson and his own boys must have reached the trapped Zebra men below the corral. But McGovern's men had a ram against the main door of the house and Clay doubted if his own boys, reinforced by the Zebra men they'd gone down to free from a cross-fire, could get back up across the yard in time. He glanced down at Brennan. The man had slumped and lay

with his eyes half-lidded and rolled up. He was dead.

Clay ran the length of the woodpile and shot from behind it at a full, springy run. Guns opened up sporadically at him, but there were not as many as he had expected. Either his own boys were keeping a lot of the Packer's busy or Zebra had cut the odds down considerably in the savage yard fighting.

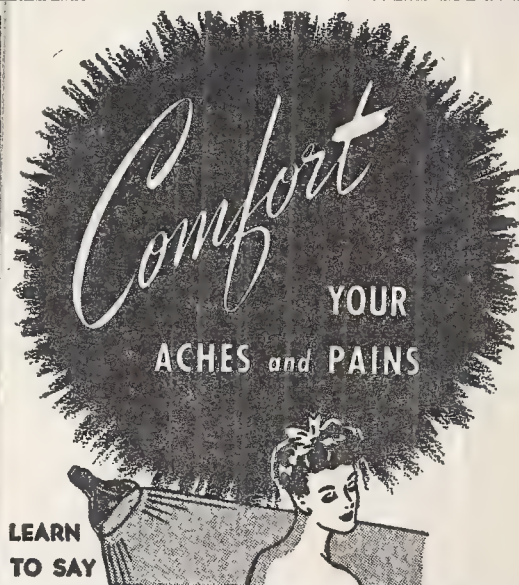
McGovern and four or five others—Clay couldn't count with certainty—were up on the veranda of the house. They vanished and he realized the door had gone down in front of their ram. A hard, jolting blow came out of the night and caught him between one stride and the next. He went down heavily, skidded, and came up again. His left leg dragged and he thought he had been hit in the thick flesh of the hip. He ran raggedly on. The house seemed at an impossible distance. Then he suddenly had planking under his feet and the black maw of the shattered door loomed ahead.

He plowed through it. A lamp burned somewhere down the room. A man was crouched in front of it, gun up. The gun jumped and Clay was flung back against the wall beside the door. With the wall at his back he snapped a shot down the room and the man in front of the lamp went over. A dead man lay across the foot of the stairs. Heavy boots were pounding down the upper hall. He heard a woman's cry over the bootfalls as he hit the stairs. A man leaned over the rail above to identify him. Clay shot him with a quick upward tilt of his gun which drove a bullet nearly the entire length of the man's body. The fellow tilted over the rail. Clay dodged his fall, staggered, and clawed his way to the upper landing. Another Packer's hand ducked out of a bedroom door, collided with Clay, and Clay cut him down with a hard, merciless swing with the barrel of his gun.

A door gaped open at the end of the hall. Clay reeled toward it, clinging to battered consciousness. A weighted feeling was in his chest and he was vaguely aware that he had been hit again. He forced himself to think only one thing: that he had not yet come onto Tracy McGovern; that he had not yet found Melody Candless in this house.

He reached the door ahead. Tracy McGovern was across the room, and Melody Candless was caught in the corner beyond him, his position in the room preventing her from dodging out of it. Her face was incredibly pallid, accentuating the flame of her hair. Her eyes were widened in a strange admixture of mortal fear and dazed admiration. McGovern's head was turned so that his gaze followed the girl's.

ALSTON understood none of this. He understood only that McGovern was in front of him; that McGovern had begun all of this;



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and that with McGovern's end this would end, also. He understood only that McGovern was a man he must kill, a man he must kill before he himself collapsed. He struggled with the heavy gun in his fingers and took one more step into the room.

A man was to one side of the doorway. Sight of him froze Alston. He shook his head in stunned disbelief. The man was on the floor. He was dressed in an invalid's gown and a pair of socks—nothing more. His legs were trailed out helplessly behind him. His lips were set and bloody, and a terrible fury was in his eyes. His body was quivering with a mighty battle between his helpless flesh and his agile mind. Clutched clumsily before him in his two knotted hands was a heavy gun, smoke trailing from its muzzle.

It was only then that Clay saw the stain on Tracy McGovern's shirt under one armpit and realized the Packer's foreman had been hit. Simultaneously with this realization, the gun in the hands of the man on the floor crashed again. Tracy McGovern turned slowly, took a long step, and pitched forward onto his face. Melody Candless stumbled from her corner and fell to her knees beside the man on the floor.

"Ray—Ray!" she sobbed.

Her brother tried to lift his head a little further. He tried to smile. The heavy gun sagged out of his fingers. His jaw moved spasmodically. And while these things happened the tight, white stiffness ran from his face. His whole body eased and he slumped suddenly. Melody looked up at Clay with stricken eyes.

"He—he dragged himself all the way up the stairs—after me!"

She broke off again, calling her brother's name. Alston leaned against the wall, gripping the surface behind him with the palms of his hands for additional support. He heard heavy footfalls in the hall and thought idly that he should square around, but it went no further than thought. Ray Candless was dead and now he, Clay Alston, could understand in part the terrific effort of will which had driven the helpless man up the stairs after his sister and Tracy McGovern. For now his own muscles had turn flaccid and were beyond his control.

The footfalls came on down the hall and into the room. Clay could hear Hank Dawson's quiet voice, though the man across the room was hardly more than a blur.

"It's done!" Hank said exultantly. "We've whipped 'em down, the whole lot. Brennan got it, out beside the woodpile, and three others is tore up some. But we didn't get bad hit for what we done. Packer's is through!"

Hank broke off. Melody Candless had come up on her feet.

"You've got your ranch, ma'am," Hank said with scant friendliness. "Just a few sheds burned. And I reckon you get your wish about neighbors. Hawk is as busted as McGovern's outfit. A heap of ash on the bench. Nothing else."

"Hawk—burned?" The girl drew in a sharp breath. "While you were here?"

"We left 'em setting torches when we saw fire this way," Hank revealed.

Melody swung toward Clay. He could feel her hands on his arms. "Clay Alston, you fool!" she breathed. "You stubborn, fighting, selfless fool! That makes two of you—you and Ray—"

From a great distance Clay heard his own voice, faint and thinned. "I reckon we were fighting for the same thing—"

"Zebra." The word came uncertainly from Melody.

"Oh, hell yes!" Hank Dawson said acidly. "For Zebra." His irony was strong. "A Texan getting himself shot to rags for somebody else's ranch!"

Clay heard Melody's intake of breath. "For the Candlesses, then—for the one that's left. Clay, I'm glad. There's got to be one happiness out of this. And I think I know what it is—to see all of the Hueco, Hawk and Zebra, behind one fence again—"

"The devil!" Hank breathed in outrage. "Still thinking of your blasted ranch!"

"No," Melody Candless said. "Not now. I've paid my debt to the Candless clan. I'm thinking of myself—and of Clay—riding our own grass together with gates unguarded and carbines hanging on the bunkhouse walls."

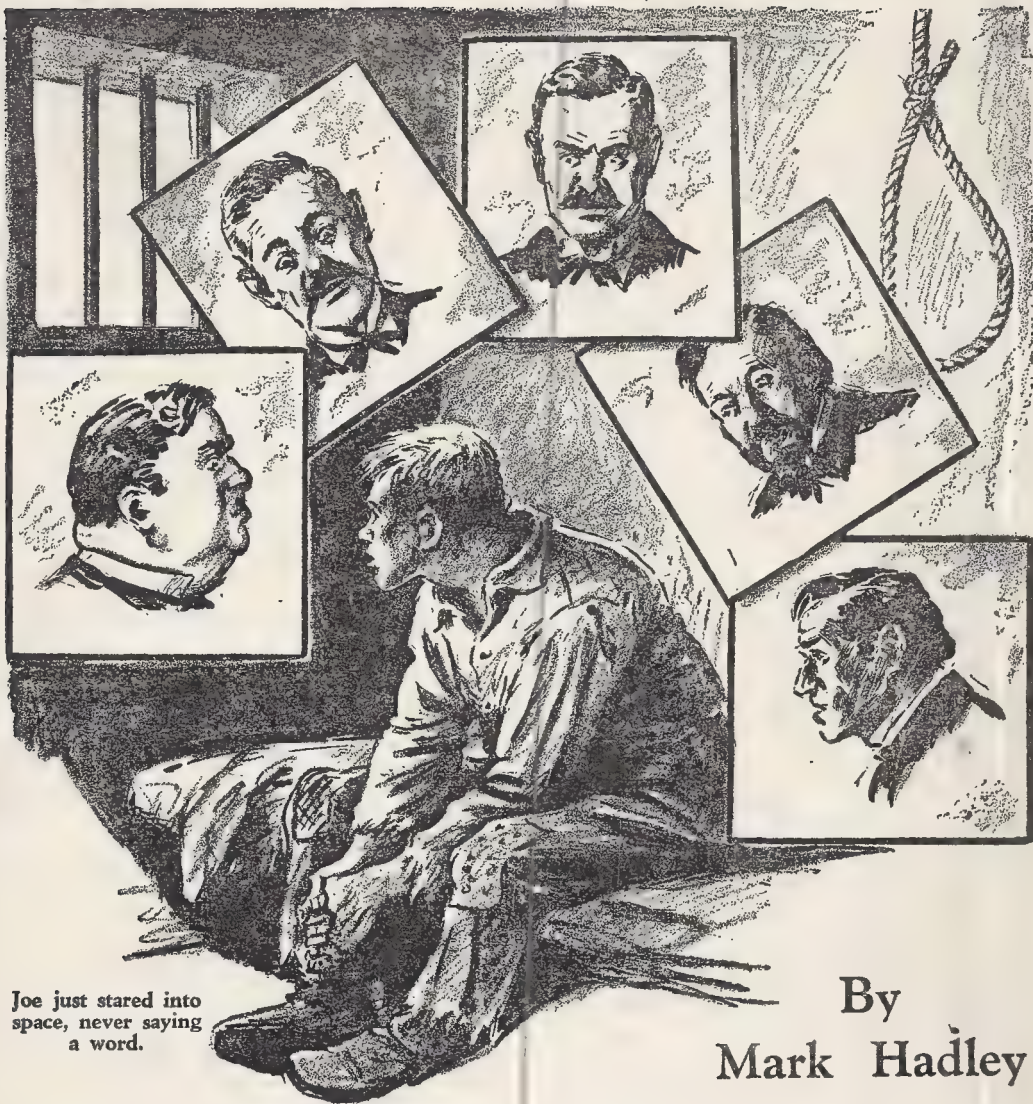
"Your own grass—?" Hank said uncertainly. "You and Clay? Blast it, woman, if you've got further use of this jigger, we'd better be getting him flattened and patched. As it is, he won't be fitten to tote a ring till fall—"

Clay felt Hank's hands under his arms and he knew it was on his foreman that he leaned, but the support which held him erect was the light, concerned touch of Melody's hand on his arm and the look in her eyes as her face swam into focus out of the fuzzy haze filling the room.

This, then, which should have been an end, was merely a beginning. Weariness and hurt drifted away from him and he grinned back at the girl beside him.

The Candless legend would not die. There would be generations of Alstons in this comfortable old house to keep alive the traditions of strong men and beautiful women. And there would be no McGovern to warp the truth. This, Clay thought quietly, was the thing for which a man lived and for which he fought.

THE END



Joe just stared into
space, never saying
a word.

By
Mark Hadley

The Devil's Backyard

Elm-shaded Ashfork had the enviable reputation of being the frontier's most peaceful and contented town. . . . Until a friendless young outcast discovered, on the last lap of his hang-tree journey, that only in hell could one find a more damned and lawless parcel of citizens!

SHERIFF FRANK DONNIGAN brought young Joe Perrins in, but he couldn't get the boy to talk. Joe stared at the floor, and shook his head to Frank's questions. So Frank quit asking questions. He filled his pipe, and smoked in silence, watching the boy.

Joe had all the appearance of a starved alley cat. His clothes were held together by patches and pins, his yellow hair looked as if it had never been combed, and judging by his pinched, big-eyed face, it had been a long time since he'd had enough to eat.

Donnigan knew the boy's story, and suddenly he was ashamed. The whole town of Ashfork should be ashamed. It was to nobody's credit, except Cap Mogan, that Joe hadn't starved to death, so it didn't make sense that Joe had killed the old man. The kid slept in the mow of Cap Mogan's barn. Old Cap didn't keep a horse, so he used the barn for a woodshed, and it was Joe's job to split Cap's wood to pay for his room.

In the evening when he had anything left from his own frugal meal, Cap left a plate of food for Joe on his back porch. The rest of the time Joe had to rummage around down town in the alleys behind the restaurants to get anything to eat. If anybody caught him at it, he'd probably get the seat of his pants kicked. His father had been hanged for horse stealing before Joe was born. His mother had died ten years later.

Not once, during the long minutes that Donnigan sat in silence with the boy, did Joe lift his head. Perhaps it was the shame that the boy's mother must have felt; perhaps it was the cuffs and kickings he'd received after she'd died. Now, as Donnigan thought about it, he remembered Joe was always that way, head down as if afraid to look anybody in the face.

Donnigan knocked the dottle from his pipe, and refilled it. He was remembering as he lit it that he'd brought the boy in, slammed him down in a chair, and started barking at him. Now he said kindly, "Joe, you've had a raw deal. I reckon old Cap was about the only man in town who treated you right."

Joe's head snapped up. Then he looked down again, and wiped a dirty sleeve across his eyes. Donnigan swallowed, and discovered that his pipe had gone out. He lighted it again. Then he said, "Joe, I'll have to keep you locked up awhile. It's like I said. I found that bloody rag in the corner of the barn, and the hatchet you cut wood with had blood on it. It was covered over with kindling as if somebody was trying to hide it. Now maybe that somebody didn't want to hide it very well, figuring that I'd find it and think you killed old Cap."

Joe nodded, and kept his head down. Donnigan thought, "He's in a hell of a fix. Old Cap didn't have an enemy in town, and the kid hasn't got a friend. They'll hang him on the strength of that hatchet."

THEN the boy did a surprising thing. He lifted his head, and looked Donnigan in the eyes when he said, "It won't make any difference to me whether you find out who did it or not. I might just as well be dead. Cap always said you had to be born right to get anywhere. He was lonesome, Cap was. He liked to talk to me because I'd listen. He

didn't have no friends, Cap didn't. Just because he lived off a government pension, and didn't have much money, folks looked down on him. He was awful lonesome, Cap was."

Donnigan hadn't thought about that. Old Cap would hobble down town every morning. He'd ask for mail, but he never got any. Then he'd go along the street to Ben Evans' store, and sit in the sun. Or, if the day was hot, he'd cross the street and sit in the shade in front of the Green Front Saloon. People would speak condescendingly, and go on by. No, Cap Mogan didn't have any enemies, but he didn't have any friends, either. Donnigan hadn't thought about it, but it was true enough. In his own way, Cap had been as much of an outcast as Joe Perrins.

"Cap knowed an awful lot, though," the boy went on. "He knowed about people here in town. He listened and watched and kept his mouth shut to everybody but me. I reckon he even did a little window peeping once in awhile. He always said that underneath the covering people pulled over them they were afraid. They didn't want other folks to know what they was really like. Like Ben Evans. He gambled a lot. He didn't want people to know that, so he'd always go at night to Rush Akins' house. That was why Evans was always so hard on people when they got behind in their bills. Cap said he guessed Akins held a lot of Evans' I.O.U.'s."

Donnigan's pipe had gone cold in his hand. He held it, not wanting to break the boy's willingness to talk.

"Then take Abel Frisbie. Because he owned the bank folks thought he was something special, but he used to go every week to Dell Richards' house down there by the bridge. They used to talk something awful about my mother when she was alive, but she never did anything bad. Cap knowed that because he used to come and talk to ma. He'd give us money sometimes. He said it was mighty queer how women would talk about each other. Mrs. Richards gives parties and things, and folks think she's high and mighty, but Frisbie used to go there every Friday night when Don Richards was out of town."

Donnigan felt like smiling then, but he didn't. The funny thing was that Abel Frisbie was planning to marry Helen Nance next week. Frisbie, the Ashfork woman said, was the best catch in town, and Helen's folks were rich. Frisbie had built a fine house on the hill, and it would be finished in time for them to move in.

"Cap said Helen was awful straight-laced," Joe went on, "and she sure wouldn't marry Frisbie if she knowed about him and Mrs. Richards. Cap allowed that Helen didn't know about how her father died, neither. Of course he couldn't prove it, but he figured that

Helen's brother, Oscar Nance, didn't fill a prescription right that Doc Lennox sent in for old man Nance. Or maybe Doc Lennox knowed about it. Maybe him and Oscar Nance fixed it up between them. Anyhow, when Nance died, Oscar inherited the drug store and some cash, and right after that Doc Lennox got married and put up that big house next to where Abel Frisbie's building."

Joe shook his head. "I shouldn't be telling you all this, but you oughtta know there's a lot of folks here who had reason to kill Cap on account of what he knowed. He always told me not to tell anybody. Said he didn't want to hurt folks, and when you did a lot of gabbing, you hurt some good people along with the bad ones. He never even talked about the time Sid Warner stole them cows Bill Thomas brought in from the valley. Abel Frisbie was in on that, too. He wanted Bill's ranch, and Bill had borrowed a lot of money from him to buy them registered cows. Him and Warner fixed it up so Warner could hide the cows in that big canyon on the back of Frisbie's ranch. Nobody ever thought about looking there."

Donnigan swore softly. He had never been able to figure out how that steal had been made. He'd got Warner later when the man had tried to drive the cows out of the county, but Warner hadn't implicated Abel Frisbie. Warner had gone to the pen, and now he was out. It had been strange that he'd had the money to buy a nice little ranch over on Bear Creek. Folks talked about what a fine thing it was that he was going straight. Now that Donnigan thought back over it, he remembered that Frisbie had foreclosed on Bill Thomas' place before the cows had been found. Thomas had been broke when he'd left the country.

The boy had stopped talking, and was rubbing his eyes with his sleeve again. He didn't look at Donnigan when he said, "I didn't aim to be blubbering like this, but I'm sure gonna miss Cap. Reckon if I'd been the one, he'd have missed me. He always said it was too

bad some folks had a lot of money, and didn't know how to use it. They was well thought of, but he said the town was like a bad cake. Had a lot of frosting that looked good, and underneath all the fixings, the cake wasn't fit to eat. You go ahead and lock me up, sheriff. Let 'em hang me. Don't make any difference."

Donnigan knocked the dottle from his pipe. He said, "Joe, I won't let 'em hang you. It's going to make a lot of difference because when this is cleared up, you're going to live with me, and you're going to get plenty to eat. Now I've got to lock you up, but don't go to fretting about it."

The boy looked at Donnigan as if he didn't believe what he'd heard. He muttered, "You can't afford to keep me, sheriff. Folks would talk about you. They say I'm no good."

"Let 'em talk," Donnigan said grimly. "Might be they'll have quite a bit to talk about before this is over."

IT HAD been the middle of the afternoon when Donnigan had found Cap's body. The old man hadn't been down town to the post-office, and he hadn't taken his usual seat in front of Ben Evans' store. They had noted it, the people down town. Cap Mogan had been a fixture along Main Street, and when he hadn't appeared, his absence had been talked about. So Donnigan had stopped at Cap's house, knocked on the door, and when no one had answered, he'd gone in. Cap was lying on the floor in his living room, his head split open. Donnigan had found no clues there, but he had found a place on the floor where somebody had smeared the blood in an effort to wipe the floor clean. Then he'd found the bloody rag and the hatchet in the barn.

Sure the kid had done it. That's what they'd said along Main Street. What could you expect out of a kid who'd come from the stock Joe Perrins had? Probably old Cap had a lot of money hidden somewhere around. He never spent a nickel, and he got that pension

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every month, didn't he? The kid had got tired living off scraps, and he'd killed the old man for his money. Then he'd made a run for it. Donnigan had found him five miles from town taking a drink from the creek.

Joe hadn't made any trouble when Donnigan had ridden up. He'd got on behind Donnigan and ridden back to town. There had been no money on him when Donnigan had searched. Now, as Donnigan took him back to a cell, he asked, "Why did you make a run for it, Joe? That looks worse for you than anything else."

"I was scared," the boy answered. "I found him this morning, and I knowed what folks would say. Cap always said when you was down folks liked to kick you so you'd stay down." He looked Donnigan in the eyes when he added, "Would you believe Abel Frisbie or any of the other men Cap knew about would kill him?"

"I don't reckon I would," Donnigan answered.

Donnigan brought the boy a plate of food from the restaurant. He said, "Joe, don't get up on the bed and look out of the window. Nobody can see you, and nobody'll know you're here." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "No, that's not the way. I want them to see you. You go ahead and eat, and I'll be back pretty soon."

Donnigan left the jail, and went directly to Cap Mogan's place. Again he examined the house, but he found no clues, nor any sign that the house had been searched for money. If he had any doubt about the kid's innocence, he had none now. If Joe had killed the old man, and had looked for money, there'd be evidence that he had searched the drawers or Cap's trunk, but there was none. That, Donnigan thought grimly, was one mistake the killer had made. Cap had been a good housekeeper, and everything was in order. A panicky kid wouldn't have thought of putting everything back as he'd found it after killing a man.

Donnigan went back to the barn, and climbed to the loft. There was a bed made in the straw in a corner, and on the floor beside it was a box of knickknacks, the sort of stuff a boy would pick up and keep. Hanging from nails on the wall were a pair of pants, a shirt, and a few other dirty garments that Joe had picked up here and there. Donnigan took down the shirt and pants, filled them with straw, and fashioned what might be taken for a head out of a pair of drawers.

Laying his straw man on the bed, Donnigan stepped back to study it. In the dark it would do. There was no moon tonight. It wasn't likely he'd be seen if he stayed in the opposite corner of the mow.

Donnigan stopped at his house, and told his wife to expect Joe about dusk. When he got

back to the jail, Joe had finished eating. Donnigan unlocked the cell door, and swung it back. He said, "Joe, old Cap was a pretty smart man, but he was off in a few points. Now like kicking a man when he's down just to keep him down. I don't reckon that's altogether true. You're going to find that there are a lot of decent folks who'll give you a hand on the way up. Old Cap had a kind of a twist in his head or he wouldn't have gone around spying on people like he did."

"I know that," Joe said defiantly, "but what I told you about people was true. He never told no lies. Nobody treated him friendly. He said he reckoned he was kind o' loco, but the only fun he got out of life was going around finding out about folks who pretended to be so high and mighty. He always said that someday he was gonna make some of 'em pay for what he knew. I'll bet he tried it, and that's why he got killed."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Donnigan agreed. "Now Joe, I'm going to bait a trap, and I'll need a little help from you. I want you to go down town. Stand along the street, and let folks see you. Maybe fifteen minutes. If anybody asks you why you aren't in jail, tell them that I found out you didn't do it. Don't say anything else, and don't talk about the things you've been telling me. Then you walk, real slow so they can see you, over to Cap's place. Soon as it gets dark, you hike for my house. My wife's expecting you, and she'll have a room all ready. Don't go up to the mow in Cap's barn. Just hide out in the house till it's dark, and then tear up to my place. Savvy?"

"Sure," Joe said.

Donnigan stood at the window until Joe disappeared from sight. For a long time he didn't move. He was thinking back over his own life, of his early years that were a lot like Joe Perrins'. He'd been eighteen when he'd come to the fork in the road. If it hadn't been for an understanding, kind-hearted rancher he'd worked for that summer, he'd have taken the wrong road and gone bad. For that he was eternally grateful, but here in Ashfork, in this smug little town with its right people so certain sure of their superiority, he'd forgotten his own youth because he'd been one of those right people. He'd failed to give Cap Mogan a hand with Joe. For all of his peculiarities, Cap had done one good thing for Joe. He'd kept him from going bad, and if anybody had reason to take the owlhoot, Joe Perrins did. Now, Donnigan thought grimly as he locked up his office, it was his job to pick up where old Cap had left off.

AFTER supper Donnigan went back down town, and climbed the stairs to the big room over Ben Evans' store. This was the meeting place of the Ashfork Club, a place

where the important men of town could meet, play cards, and have a few drinks. Nobody gambled more than he could afford; none of them drank more than he could carry. Underneath the superficial tinsel was the fear in every man's heart that the others might not think well of him.

They were all there when Donnigan went in; Ben Evans, Abel Frisbie, Don Richards, Oscar Nance, Doc Lennox, and some more whom Joe hadn't mentioned. For a moment there was silence when Donnigan came in, and he thought grimly they had been giving him a going over. He stepped up to the bar, and as he poured a drink, he said, "Why the silence, boys? Sounds like a wake, or do they make noises at a wake?"

Don Richards laughed. "It isn't a wake, Frank. I guess you just surprised us."

Richards worked for the railroad, and was out of town three nights a week. Donnigan wondered if Richards knew about his wife and Abel Frisbie. He thought, "Don wouldn't let on if he did. He'd cover up just like everybody else for the sake of what the rest of them think."

Frisbie got up from a chair, and walked to the bar. He had the pompous air that money and power brings to some men. No one in Ashfork questioned what Frisbie did or didn't do. He was above that, and he knew it.

"You're a good sheriff, Frank," Frisbie said, "but even a good sheriff makes mistakes. You've got an iron-clad case against the Perrins kid. You picked him up when he was trying to get out of the country, and then you turn him loose. None of us feel right about having a killer loose in the community.

We all have wives or sweethearts, Frank. Most of us have children. We won't stand for it. You go pick him up, and put him back behind bars."

Donnigan smiled a little. "Thanks for the orders, Abel. I guess we'd say you're a good banker, but even good bankers make mistakes."

"What do you mean?" Frisbie demanded.

"Maybe I'd better begin at the other end."

Donnigan looked soberly around the room. "The kid didn't do the killing, but maybe he knows who did. He found Cap's body. Then he got scare. Like any kid and most men, he couldn't think of anything but getting away."

Frisbie stirred uneasily. "You say he knows who did it?"

"Well, you know how the kid is. He's been kicked around so much he doesn't trust anybody. It's hard to make him talk. I thought if I turned him loose, I could get out of him what he knows."

"I'd like to know how you're so sure the kid didn't murder Cap," Oscar Nance said coldly. "Maybe you've tried him and found him not guilty."

Cap had suspected Oscar Nance of poisoning his father so he could inherit the drug store. Now Donnigan, looking at Nance in a new light, decided it could well have been that way. The old man's death was sudden and unexpected. Nance was a small, owlsh man who stared accusingly at Donnigan as if he wanted Frisbie to know he thoroughly agreed with him.

"I guess maybe I have," Donnigan agreed. "You see, the killer made a mistake. He wanted everybody to think Joe did the killing.

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We've all talked about how Cap had money hidden in his house. It was natural enough to blame Joe for it, so the killer frames him by trying to hide the hatchet in the kindling."

"Hogwash," Doc Lennox snorted. "Of course the kid did it. Hiding the hatchet would be about as far as that boy could think."

Lennox was so fat that his belly jiggled when he walked. He didn't like to get out of bed at night for a case, and he didn't like to attend cases far from town. That was why the doctor over in Beulah had most of the country business. It was strange, Donnigan was thinking, that Lennox could build a big house and get married shortly after old man Nance had died suddenly, and before he had trouble paying his board bill.

"It could be," Donnigan agreed, "but there's another point. Now the kid might have hidden the hatchet if he'd killed Cap, which shows that he was maybe scared and panicky. The point is, the killer forgot that the kid would have hunted for the money and he wouldn't have put everything back. He'd have left the house looking like a cyclone hit it. When I found the body this afternoon, there wasn't a thing out of place in the house, which proves to me Joe didn't do the job."

Ben Evans shook his head. "That sounds good, but you still have no right to turn the kid loose. The grand jury ought to hear what he's got to say."

Donnigan grinned at the storekeeper. Cap had told Joe that Ben Evans gambled heavily in Rush Akins' place, and was badly in debt. Then Donnigan's grin faded, for he suddenly thought that if Ben Evans was the killer, he'd be the kind to think about replacing everything when he'd searched the house for money. If he really needed money, he might have believed the stories about Cap Mogan's hidden savings.

"Ben," Donnigan said thoughtfully, "you hit the nail on the head when you said the grand jury should hear what the kid's got to say. He didn't tell me all he knows, but he told me plenty. It seems that old Cap only got one kind of fun out of life. He listened and he watched, and Joe says he did a little window-peeping. What he picked up by spying on the upper crust of this town is enough to knock the lid right off this Ashfork Club when it gets out."

They looked at him in a sort of stunned silence while time ran on from one eternal-minute to another, and fear laid its chill fingers upon them. Then Abel Frisbie said hoarsely, "What sort of things did he tell you, Frank?"

"Well, take the time Sid Warner stole Bill Thomas' cows. I never had been able to figure out how Sid hid them until he thought he

could get them out of the county, but Joe cleaned that up for me, and the grand jury will be glad to hear it. He had something to say," Donnigan's eyes swung to Doc Lennox, "about how old man Nance died. You'll remember, Doc, you said you couldn't understand how he could take such a quick turn for the worse."

The doctor's fat cheeks reddened. He shot a furtive glance at Oscar Nance, and nodded. "That's right, Frank. Oscar couldn't understand it, either."

"It seems that old Cap had an eye on Rush Akins' place. Joe said it was surprising who sneaked down there to sit in on some big games when they were mighty righteous about gambling here in the club." Donnigan laid his glance on Richards. "Cap wasn't above talking about some of the women." Richards' mouth dropped open. He swallowed audibly. "You boys will remember how Joe's mother was talked to death as much as starved. That got under old Cap's hide because he liked Mrs. Perrins. Well, Abel, that's the sort of thing old Cap learned, and he told Joe all he knew. I reckon Joe will tell what he knows in the morning. I'd like to have it down in writing, but you know how the kid is. He just doesn't trust anybody. I told him to go back to his bed in Cap's hay loft, and think it over."

Donnigan moved to the door. There he paused. "You know, it strikes me that a man who'd go to all the trouble Cap did must have kept a diary. Tomorrow I'm going over his house with a fine-toothed comb, and if I can find it, it'll furnish some good reading for a grand jury." Then Donnigan stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him.

DONNIGAN went immediately to the loft in Cap Mogan's barn, and sat down some distance from Joe Perrins' bed. The trap had been baited. Now there was nothing to do but wait. All night Donnigan kept his ears keened for the first sound of steps; the stealthy whisper of hands and feet on the ladder that led up into the mow, but none came. The carefully laid trap had not been sprung. When it was light Donnigan got up and stretched cramped muscles, swearing softly. As he went down the ladder and into the early morning light, he thought back over what he had said the night before in the Ashfork Club, tried to find his mistake, and could not.

Halfway to Cap Mogan's house Donnigan stopped. At this hour the town was still asleep. There was no sound but the chirp of an early morning bird in the tree above him, yet he had a feeling he was being watched, a feeling that became a certainty when the brittle sound of a board creaking underfoot came to him. His hand knifed down for his gun as he took a quick step toward the house. That step saved

his life. A gun barked from the back porch. The light was still thin, but he could make out the figure of a man moving toward him through the back door of Mogan's house, gun arcing down for another shot.

Donnigan's shot was quick and accurate. He ran toward the house as the man started to slump, paused to fire again as the killer's gun came up, wavered, and spilled out of his hand. The bushwhacker fell face down, rolled over, and off the porch to the ground as Donnigan came up. The man was Abel Frisbie.

"Gun work isn't your line, Abel," Donnigan said softly as he knelt beside the banker. "You do better with an axe."

"I guess I do," Frisbie breathed. Blood formed a scarlet froth on his lips. "I hunted all night for Cap's diary, but I didn't find it. I aimed to get you and then the kid. He won't die for my crime, Frank. Maybe justice . . . has . . . a way . . ." Then Abel Frisbie died.

Donnigan slept that day. He'd told his wife to tell Joe when the boy woke up that he had nothing to worry about. "You buy him some decent clothes, Ann. Tell him that from now on we're his folks. And Ann, if anybody commits a crime today, tell them to wait till night to get arrested. Frisbie fooled me. He must have figured I'd be waiting in the barn, so he thought he'd get the jump on me by bushwhacking me from the house. If he's known how to shoot, he'd have done the job, too. Tell Joe he's going to work on our ranch."

It was late afternoon when Donnigan came out of his bedroom, his shoes in his hand. His wife looked up from her sewing. She said breathlessly, "What's got into this town, Frank? For years everything has gone along so smoothly, and now Abel Frisbie tries to kill you. Everybody thought Abel was a wonderful man. He had everything, Frank. Why did he want to murder poor old Cap Mogan?"

"I reckon we'll never know, Ann." Donnigan pulled on a shoe, and started to lace it.

"My guess is that Mogan knew something about him, and was trying to blackmail him. Maybe Frisbie wasn't quite the wonderful man we all thought."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Oh, I picked it up somewhere." Donnigan straightened up. "How'd you get along with Joe?"

Mrs. Donnigan laughed. "I've been feeding him all day. I never saw such a hungry boy in my life. Frank, we should have done something for him a long time ago."

"Uh huh," Donnigan agreed, "but it took a murder for us to see it. Where is he now?"

"I took him out to the ranch. He was tickled to death when I told him you said he could work there. I told the boys to see that he had something to do." Mrs. Donnigan stopped, her eyes on her husband. "Frank, I asked you what got into this town. A lot of things have happened while you've been asleep."

"Things?" Donnigan pulled on his other shoe. "What sort of things?"

"Last night Oscar Nance shot himself. Today Doctor Lennox sold his house and left town. Besides that I heard Don Richards has left his wife. Isn't it funny that all these things would happen just after Abel Frisbie killed Cap Mogan and tried to kill you?"

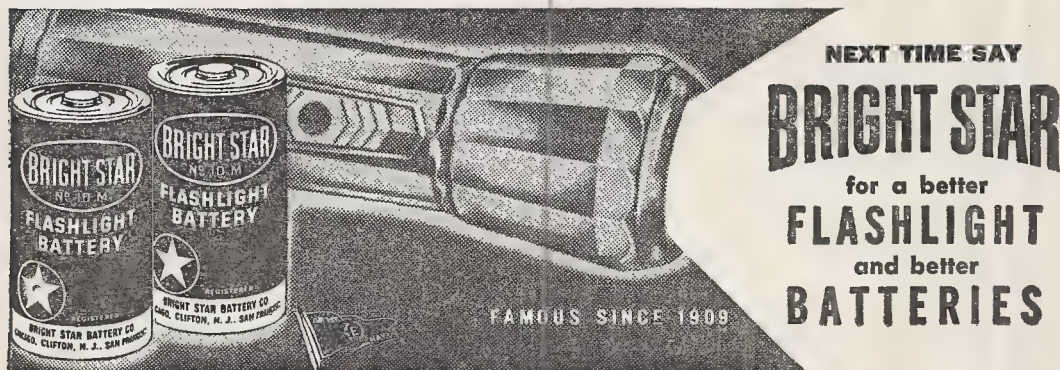
"Guess I'll have to speak to Ben Evans about gambling with Rush Akins," Donnigan muttered. "No sense in trying to hide something. If a man wants to gamble let him gamble where folks can see him."

"What did you say?" Mrs. Donnigan demanded. "I can't hear you."

"Looks like our Ashfork Club is in bad shape." Donnigan straightened. "I was saying that sometimes justice has a way of getting done when you don't expect it."

"And it wouldn't surprise me if you had a hand in it," Mrs. Donnigan said accusingly.

Donnigan grinned. "Why now, maybe I did give it a little nudge, me and Joe."



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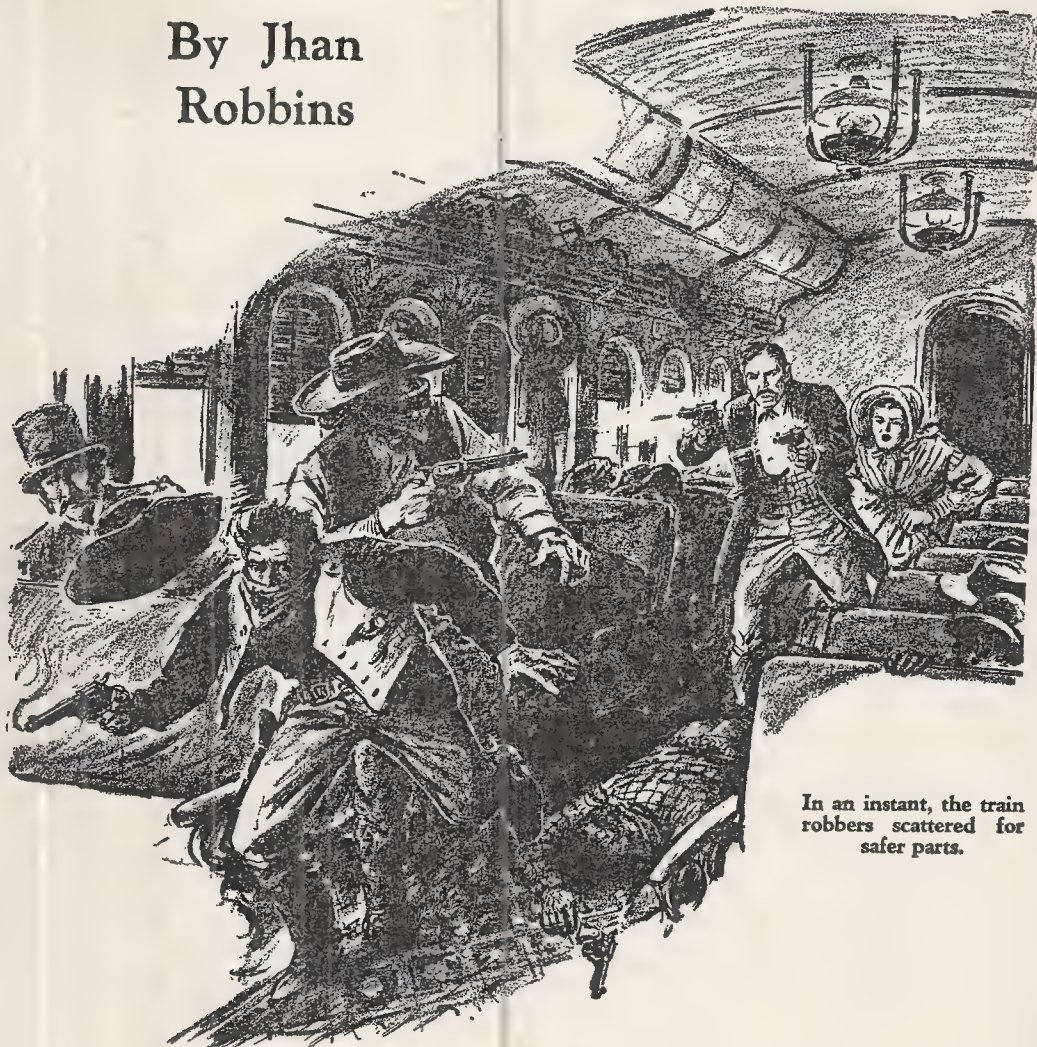
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BATTERIES

FAMOUS SINCE 1909

Horsethieves Never Die!

By Jhan
Robbins



In an instant, the train robbers scattered for safer parts.

"So I'm a loud-mouthed gun-slinger, am I?" shouted go-to-hell Hank Vaughan as his notched sixguns spat flaming death. "I'll show you I'm just a decent, peace-loving citizen—if I have to fill Boothill to prove it!"

"HANK VAUGHAN, the gambler, is reported dead," read the front page item in the Pendleton *East Oregonian*. But the report was a little exaggerated, and Hank Vaughan resented being called a gambler, Daredevil, gunslinger, even horsethief—for this was a matter of record—

might justly be included in his obituary, but Vaughan was all his life a cautious and prudent man in money matters.

Both guns drawn, Vaughan charged the unresisting door of the newspaper office.

"Gambler, huh?" he howled, as printer, editor and typesetter skipped out the back

door. "I'll show you I'm a decent, law abiding citizen!" And he loosed a volley of shots at the retreating journalists to prove his point.

He was always proud of his public reputation, and was quick to throw hot lead in the direction of the finger of suspicion.

There is little doubt, however, that he was a desperado and a bandit—a clever one, for he was never caught.

Against him was his early record. Born in 1847, probably in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, Vaughan, at seventeen, was an unlovely character who hung out around the toughest saloon and dancehalls.

His redeeming feature was that he loved horses. But he loved them a little too well. With a friend named Dan Burns he rounded up a choice herd of horses in the Blue Mountains and headed for Boise, Idaho, to sell them. The horses all bore distinct brands and most had ear notches, but he chose to overlook that.

Sheriff Frank Maddock, through whose turbulent Baker County he passed on his way east, spotted the stolen herd at once and started in pursuit, taking with him a deputy named Hart.

Vaughan led him a merry chase, backing into the hills, traveling by night, and doubling back on his tracks, but one night the Sheriff and Hart overtook the two thieves as they lay sleeping on the ground.

There was a slight noise, and the youthful Vaughan found himself looking up into the face of the deputy, Hart, and into the mouth of a drawn gun. The sheriff, thinking the eighteen-year-old lad would be no trouble at all, had elected to capture the older Burns himself. For the sheriff, it was a lucky choice.

Vaughan bounced onto his feet, shooting. Hart, startled, fired wildly at the agile boy, missed him and struck Burns, who fell dead at the sheriff's feet. Vaughan's first two shots killed the deputy; his third, snapped out as he whirled around, buried itself in the sheriff's face just beneath the cheekbone. As the lawman pitched forward into the still-warm blankets, Vaughan swung onto the sheriff's saddled and steaming horse and galloped into the hills.

When Maddock and his deputy failed to return, a posse from a nearby mining camp started after him. The sheriff had made no secret of his errand, and they knew just where to look.

This was Vaughan's first gun battle, and for an amateur he had certainly left the little camp a gory mess. The wounded sheriff was conveyed back to town, the dead buried in the dark-stained blankets, and a small posse took out after Hank Vaughan. A trail of blood pointed the way.

THIS is the first evidence we have of Vaughan's amazing endurance and his ability to survive wounds that would have killed two men of lesser vitality. The sheriff's first shot had torn through his abdomen, he was bleeding furiously; yet he managed to mount his horse and gallop ten miles into the hills before a posse overtook him early the next noon. His gun empty, his strength sapped, Vaughan offered no resistance to the miners and, his wound still unattended, was carted twenty miles over rough trails to the county seat at Auburn.

There, after a well-meaning but ill-advised citizen named John Hailey thwarted a vigilante attempt to hang the young killer, Vaughan was sentenced to life imprisonment . . . as a horse thief.

He served eight years. On his release he dropped down out of the Northwest and was heard of just once in a period of seven years, when he was reported sheriff of a town near Elko, Nevada.

Unlike many killers of the West who at one time wore a sheriff's star, Vaughan did not turn over a new leaf and begin to ride the forces of the right. More characteristically, he appears to have used his legal office to enable him to get his light-fingered lariat on another herd of fast horses.

In Central Nevada, horse stealing had become big business. The area was dominated by a modern-type "combine" which had cornered the stolen horse market and was pressing the small ranchers to extinction.

This gang, headed by a red-haired gunman named Edward Beans, who reportedly stood seven feet high in his stocking feet, was confronted by a puzzling situation soon after Sheriff Vaughan took office.

Too often, they would close in on a defile where a juicy herd of horses were supposed to be grazing, only to find their lassos closing over empty air and sharp hoofprints in the sand the only trace of the vanished herd.

Ed Beans concluded that the new sheriff was outsmarting him, tipping off the ranchers to his raids. Followed by two of his men, he booted his way into Vaughan's little office.

"Sheriff," he said bluntly, "I won't stand for law and order around here. It's costing me money. I don't like it."

Vaughan's cool, raised eyebrow indicated that he agreed heartily with the big-time horsethief, but to Beans it simply registered defiance. He grew more persuasive.

"If you'll stop bustin' up my operations, Vaughan, there's something in it for you. A thousand."

Cold silence from Vaughan.

"Two thousand."

"Vaughan looked bored."

"Tell you what, Sheriff, we could team up together. You could come in with me. . . ." Beans saw gunplay gleaming in Vaughan's eye too late. In a matter of split seconds, Vaughan's phenomenally fast gun had killed Beans and his two off-guard men with three economical shots.

"Two thousand isn't enough," Vaughan told the red-haired giant who was dying on his office floor, "and I don't split my take with no one. It's whole hog or none for Hank Vaughan."

Two hours later, Vaughan turned in his star and started north to his old stamping grounds, driving a huge herd of horses before him.

Vaughan settled down in Pendleton, Oregon, in Umatilla County, apparently a rich man. He married a widow with three children and became, to all appearances, a wheat farmer. He was never again directly connected with crime, but fell under his neighbors' suspicion because of his habit of dropping out of sight for a few days or a few weeks, periods which remarkably coincided with a new outburst of holdups, rustling of horses or daring train robberies.

JUST once more, Vaughan fought on the side of the law. He was returning with his wife from a trip to Idaho when three bandits boarded the train. Hank was sleeping, his head on his wife's ample shoulder, when he heard the scatter of shots and the train ground to a halt. Dazed, he raised his head and opened one eye to find himself covered by one of the gunmen who stood in the aisle of the train brandishing a revolver. Hank had no choice but to raise his hands; his brace of pistols were hidden under the black tailcoat he habitually wore.

His wife, who was the daughter of an Indian mother and a famous Idaho pioneer named Craig, did some fancy thinking. Pretending to faint, she leaned against her husband, flung an arm around him for support . . . and reached up behind his tailcoat to unfasten his gunbelt. The weapons slid toward the floor. In one graceful movement, Vaughan bowed sweepingly to the floor, snatched the pistols as they slid from beneath his long coat, and straightened up with both guns blazing.

In an instant, the train robbers were scattered and running; one lay dead in the door of the coach.

The railroad company granted Vaughan a lifelong free pass for this service. Curiously, the radius of daring holdups that so coincidentally accompanied Vaughan's frequent disappearances widened out after this, and one historian says that Vaughan was now riding free to the scenes of his crimes.

He didn't always use two guns. It was a tenderfoot stranger who taught him to shoot with his left hand, by the simple expedient of drilling a hole in his right one. Vaughan's idea of a huge joke was to walk into a bar, select a victim and order him to dance a polka, walk on his hands, imitate a pig, or perform any one of a number of childish and humiliating tricks which no one dared refuse. It was a sight to see . . . two tough Oregonian miners waltzing sweetly with one another while Vaughan beat time with his drawn gun.

But one day he choose the wrong man. The quiet little tenderfoot did as he was ordered, humbly enough. Then he walked out of the saloon, went down the street, bought a pistol, loaded it and walked back to where Vaughan stood talking to a local drygoods merchant. Raising the pistol, the greenhorn slammed a .44 bullet through Vaughan's right palm before the gunman could get his own weapon into play. Then, as Vaughan flung himself on the floor and waited, crippled, for the unknown marksman to finish him off, the tenderfoot turned and walked back up the street. No one ever saw him again.

When friends came to call on Vaughan as he lay abed the next day with his hand bound and swelling, they heard the thud of sixgun bullets from his bedroom. There was Vaughan shooting with his left hand at a Jack of Diamonds tacked up against the opposite wall. His wife sat calmly by his side, feeding him chicken broth. When he got well, he was as fast with his left as with his right, and from then on he was a two gun man.

Hank couldn't stand competition. He was proud of his reputation as a dangerous character, and when he heard that another gunman named Charlie Long was gun boss of the town of Prineville, about two hundred miles away, Hank was consumed with curiosity and jealousy.

Buckling on both guns and filling his belt full of ammunition, Vaughan trotted the two hundred miles to Prineville and there inquired cautiously for Charlie Long.

"I'm Long," said the boss of Prineville.

"How do," said Vaughan politely. Sizing each other up, the two desperados exchanged small talk. They agreed to have a game of cards, and went outside to the porch.

Along about the second hand, Long pulled out a bowie knife and, with great deliberation, pinned Vaughan's leather chaps to the wooden seat. Vaughan, just as deliberately, threw his knife and lifted Long's brimmed hat off his head and pegged it to the wall behind him. Then Hank said:

"Long, you'll make a cannoneer in hell."

And Long replied:

"I don't aim to be knifed by no horsethief."

In a shower of close shots and puffs of

white smoke, their four guns boomed at once. When silence settled again, the bartender poked his head out the door and saw the two kingpins sprawled senseless on the floor.

Bored and somewhat annoyed by the noise and mess raised by the two, the barkeep scooped them up and, still bleeding like stuck pigs, they were dumped into the same bed in a little room above the saloon, where they lay unattended for five days while the citizens of Prineville waited hopefully for them to cash in their chips.

But the pulsing vitality so common to badmen and troublesome children pulled them through.

Hank regained consciousness first. He propped himself up on a wobbly arm and peered at the still form beside him. Then he reached into his back pocket, hauled out a miraculously unbroken pint of whiskey and let it gurgle down his throat. Long awoke with a snort and Hank generously thrust the bottle between his lips. Half an hour later, they stumbled feebly down the stairs, feeling much better. Now they were fast friends and comrades-in-arms, and they repaired to Long's home where they nursed each other tenderly back to health.

But it wasn't often that Hank could face a champion worthy of his steel, and as busy and growing Pendleton gave its time more and more to such mundane thoughts as side-walks, schoolhouses and ditch-digging, the restless badman turned often to exhibitionism.

ONE day he invented a new game. With a bunch of cronies, he was drinking at a bar and suggested that they line up their glasses along the bar and take turns pinging away at them with their six-shooters.

The bartender protested bitterly, but they paid him no mind at all. Soon they were all popping away merrily, with the understanding that the gunman who failed to break all the glasses had to buy the next round. Hank was way ahead, and they continued the game until they had broken all the glasses. Then they went merrily away, leaving the bartender weeping into the sawdust.

But the next day, gentlemanly Hank Vaughan returned to the shattered saloon, surveyed the damage, and peeled off three hundred dollars in small bills and handed it over to pay for the damage.

Horses remained his love and his pet extravagance. He had a dancing, temperamental team of bays that he drove behind a light buckboard. He bragged that he had paid \$500 apiece for the matched team, and it was his great delight to whip them through the town at a dead run, then haul them back on their haunches to a sudden stop. He was

terribly proud and sensitive where his horsemanship was concerned.

However, the lively, overbred horses were almost a match for him. One day, a friend named Doc Whitley said to him jokingly:

"You act like you're scared of the critters, Hank. Why don't you hire a real rider to break them for you?"

Hank, a challenging gleam in his devilish eyes, invited the Doc to try. Doc climbed into the buggy, grabbed the whip, and poured it on the horses.

Instantly, they threw up their heads and bolted. This was more than the Doc had bargained for. He had counted on Hank's strong hands to hold them in.

"Fer Gossakes, haul 'em in!" he yelled.

For answer, daredevil Hank, seeking a thrill, threw the lines to the ground and, standing up in the seat, gave an Indian yell. Down the street they stampeded at a break-neck pace.

The team, running much too fast to make a turn, crashed into the corner of a house and went down to their knees, the buckboard and its hysterical occupants piling on top. The Doc rose into the air, described a graceful dive, and landed with a thud on his round belly in a soft patch of grass. Hank, still laughing, was carted away with three broken bones.

It was in the performance of just such an insane stunt that he met his end.

In 1883, all of Pendleton was feeling very gay and devoted a week in the summer to celebrating the laying of the first patch of cement sidewalk in Eastern Oregon. Vaughan had drunk his fill of red liquor and, mounted on his horse, was recalling the old, wild days by racing up and down the new strip of cement on horseback, shooting off his gun.

At the end of the strip, he hauled hard on the reins, bringing his horse up sharply like a rodeo cowboy. The animal rose into the air, pawing wildly with its front hoofs, while the rear legs danced on the sidewalk and the inebriated Hank yelled exultantly. It had been raining, the horse's legs slid out from under it, and the colorful badman of Eastern Oregon looped through the air and slammed his head against an unyielding telephone pole.

Still strong, he lingered a week before he gave up the fight. When he died, they counted thirteen bullet wounds on his body; five of the slugs he still carried with him.

Although his death caused most of the newspapermen in that part of the country to print flowery stories, bordered in black, about his passing, the editor whom Hank Vaughan had once gunned out of his shop for printing a false death notice, this time, cautiously, ignored the whole thing.

Judge Colt Holds Court

By **Barnie
Stacy**



The surprised gunslick mouthed an oath, turned on Ike with the menacing gun uplifted.

IKE BYSON glared venomously at the second-hand roll top desk. Suddenly, like an ornery bronc, he lunged to his feet, savagely heeled the rickety swivel chair backward to careen crazily against the wall. Following which he grimly fisted the ink bottle, squinted

his eyes, and slammed it against the beautiful new framed law diploma on the wall. The brassy goboon next drew his slit-eyed regard and he kicked it spinning across the room. With neck arched, nostrils flaring bull-like, he considered ramming his head against the wall,

Roaring Booneville's trigger-happy populace stoutly maintained that three frontier lawyers were one too many for any town. . . . So when young Ike Byson hung out his brand-new shingle, the appreciative citizens voted to give him his first big case—one made of coffin-pine!

but discretion suggested some less maiming way of venting his helpless rage.

For two long, lonely months he had waited for his first client. Waited in vain for the client who had never appeared.

It was too much for a man to stand without something busting. This silent treatment. The cool, over-courteous, unsmiling nods of Booneville's citizens. A man had to let off some steam, or crack. Or tear into a good healthy fist fight. But fight whom? And why? He knew the futility of trying to lash out at a foe he couldn't see.

And, when he had tried to pin down some of the natives and pry the truth from them, he'd met with shrugs, weak suggestions, "Yuh'r jist imaginin'. It takes time for folks to size up a newcomer and git acquainted."

He knew it was a lie.

Diagonally across the street he could see the imposing suite of Booneville's leading legal lights, Chittum & Gowdy. Besides himself, they—not counting slovenly, liquor-reeking Laz Tatum—composed the total of the town's law talent.

Certainly not too many for a booming town like Booneville, with new settlers coming in, new business houses mushrooming up. And, on court days, the docket was crowded. With homesteaders wedging in among the big cattlemen, there was the inevitable litigation, boundary disputes.

And Hank Chittum and Lem Dowdy, Ike observed, invariably represented the cattlemen interests, while cringing Laz Tatum handled, with bungling indifference, Ike thought, the unprofitable homesteaders' cases.

Ike's brown eyes narrowed wrathfully as it ran through his mind now. He advanced on the taunting new bookcase, holding his meager law library, cocked his foot, to send it crashing through the glass slide doors. He knew this was the end. The end of bright young dreams. Down to his last three silver dollars, he'd go back where he belonged. Back in the saddle where he'd been raised.

But the poised heel wasn't unleashed.

Instead, Ike lowered it, stalked to the window, drawn by unusually loud voices.

What he saw fanned the fires of his helpless fury, but it also filled him with exultant anticipation. A small man, garbed in rough homesteaders' raiment, stumbled from the stairway which led to Chittum & Dowdy's offices. Two other men, one a tall lean man, the other thick-set, of medium height, flanked him.

The three were hotly auguring about something as the 'steader headed angling across the street toward Ike's office.

As Ike stared the lanky man, in range garb, grabbed the homesteader's arm, yanked him around with a growled curse. The little man's irate voice drifted up to Ike. "Yuh can go to hell—yuh and yore polecat law bosses. I aim to see a lawyer that ain't owned, body and soul, by these range hawgin' cowmen!"

The tall cowhand got in a sneak punch then, and the little man sprawled in the dust. But he had spunk, Ike saw with elation. He bounded up fighting like a cornered catamount. And with a flailing, rushing attack, he was hammering his towering assailant backward.

For, a leering grin on his hard face, the blocky man was maneuvering himself around to the sodbuster's rear, clubbed six-shooter upraised, plainly intent on bashing in the little man's skull.

IKE'S long, saddle-warped legs carried him down the stairs with incredible speed. A slim, strong limbed six-footer, he'd never learned to feel at ease in his serge business suit, hard high collar and tie. Neither had those lean, sacrificing years in law school erased the marks of one born to the saddle, or dented the drawing vernacular of the range country. He still clung to high-heeled boots, tops worn under his pants. His hair was the rusty shade of red sandstone, the jaw stubborn, jutting, and the brown eyes had more than once smoldered with wrathful indignation at the high-handed tactics employed against the immigrants, both in and out of court.

Old Dean Colfax at the university had said, handing Ike his coveted sheepskin, "Son, pick a new town, a small town with a future, and grow up with the town and people. Don't make the mistake some young law grads do, of hitting for the city. There you'd be just a minnow, lost in a sea of legal whales."

It was sound counsel, Ike knew. "But," he reflected bitterly, "he'd certainly picked himself one hell of a town to hang out his shingle."

A savage joy that here, at last, was something tangible against which he could vent the accumulated rage of weeks, carried Ike to mid-street, hardly knowing how he got there.

None of the three were aware of his presence until his big hand clutched the shoulder of the blocky gun wielder just as he had found his opening and, with a triumphant leer had started his downward stroke. Ike spun him

backward and around. "Where I come from, hombre, a sneak play like this stinks—plumb awful," he grated.

The surprised fellow mouthed an oath, turned on Ike with the menacing gun uplifted. "And where I was brung up," he snarled, "we know how to handle smart-alecky jacklairs that butt into another feller's business."

Ike sidestepped, fended off the downward chopping gun with left arm, and, with perfect timing his right rocketed from knee-level to explode under the renegade's chin. It lifted him an inch, then to crash to the board walk, a sprawling, inert heap.

The other rammihan seemed confused at this unexpected change in the odds. Frantically, he lowered his right to claw for his gun, just as the little homesteader connected with one of his sweeping haymakers to the jaw. He sagged down, rubber-legged, groggy, lay there glaring, all the fight drained out of him.

A small crowd had collected. They stared coldly at Ike and the homesteader, silent, resentful. A window slammed up overhead, Hank Chittum's scowling face looked down, he muttered an astonished curse, withdrew, slammed the window down again.

Ike's eyes burned into the faces around them, lips curled in withering contempt. "Come on, Pardner," he said, taking the panting homesteader's arm, and he pushed roughly through the crowd. "I got a bowl and pitcher in my office. And we can do some palaverin'."

LATER, when the homesteader had washed blood and sweat-caked dust from his battered face, he said gloomily: "The name is Lon Beavers and I'm right kindly obleeged to yuh. Reckon yuh saved me from a bad handlin'—or wuss."

He shook his head dubiously. "However, yuh shore took cards in a mess o' trouble, sidin' me."

"There's times," Ike growled, "when a man's decency don't give much choice in the matter of sides."

"Matter o' fact, I was headin' here when they jumped me," Beavers went on. "About a year ago I filed on a rough, broken section of land south of Booneville. It's fitten only for goats, and a little hay crop. 'Taint nowise cattle grazin' land; however, lately the big Diamond Y Cattle Company, through Chittum & Dowdy, has been claimin' over half my land. When I refused to vamoose they burnt my haystacks, stompeded a herd of goats off a cliff into Long Lake, and they drowned. And when I still wouldn't budge, they filed a law claim ag'in' me."

Beavers hesitated. "Calc'late I sorter went loco, lost my head this mornin'. I called on Chittum & Dowdy, showed 'em my claim papers, tried to git 'em to call off the suit. They

jist laughed. Said the cowmen owned the range, and would run every squatter out. That's when I called 'em a bunch of thievin' skunks. Told 'em I was headin' over tuh see Booneville's new lawyer, and find out if the ranchers owned him too, meanin' yuh. That's when they sicked their tough gun dawgs on me, and I reckon yuh know the rest."

Ike nodded. "Tried to shoo yuh away from me, huh?"

"Well, it's queer. Best I can figger, they've planted the idee purty solid here that nesters'll ruin the country. That it belongs, law or no law, to cowmen, who fought and held it ag'in' Injuns. And by hook and crook they've built up a strong prejudice ag'in' 'stidders; and they've let it out that you're here to side us. Up until recent, with only one other lawyer in town, and him a rumpot, they've had things pretty much their own way. I aim to fight 'em. And the case is your'n, if yuh'll take it. Although," he added, "I don't know how or when I can pay yuh."

"Sold," Ike said grimly. "We'll give them a battle, and win or lose, it beats wearin' out the seat of my britches. Tell me what yuh know about the Diamond Y's claims."

"It seems," Beavers related, "They've dug up an old Spanish Grant from some'r's, dated way back. And an old map. Accordin' to it the line bends to cut across the east side of my place, and across Long Lake, which is only a fifteen-mile canyon dammed up at the lower end, fed by springs and snow water."

"It's pecoolyar. As I say, my land's no good for cows, but, near as I can savvy it, iffen they can make this boundary stand up, it'll automatically give 'em title to several thousand acres on both sides, and dispossess maybe a dozen other 'stidders."

Ike frowned. "I know about them old Spanish Grants. They're slipshod, a lot of 'em run off with rubber chains. But if they can prove this one valid, it'll be tough to crack. The courts still uphold 'em. This one's known as the Old Cowhide Grant. Accordin' to the tale, Good King Philip of Spain wanted to endow his confessor, the Padre Balli, with Texas land."

"So, he called him in and says, 'I will grant you all the land around which you can drag a cowhide in three days'. Well, it seems the priest was a shrewd one. Before settin' out he posted hosses in relays. And then, when he was ready, he rode the whole three days without stoppin', ended up by enclosin' several million acres with his cowhide."

"But King Phil, he was a dead game sport. He gave Balli title, as promised, and it stands to this day, when proved valid."

"I allow that's about the how of it," Beavers said glumly. "But I can't savvy why, if they knowed this all the time, they didn't spring it fast, 'stid o' tryin' to hooraw me offen the land."

Nor why they didn't know it in the Austin land office, when they approved my homestead filin'."

"It's just possible," Ike said thoughtfully, "there may be an Injun under a buffalo chip, somewhere, if we can smoke him out."

Beavers left and Ike sat for minutes staring at the ceiling, feet propped on desk.

A pattern was shaping up in his mind, but its outlines were still hazy. The antagonism of the big cattle interest was natural. But feeling seemed to be going further than that. Plainly a clever effort was being made to direct public feeling against not only the sod-busters, but to head off outside legal talent. Whatever lay behind the conspiracy, it was clever propaganda.

DEEPLY engrossed in thought, Ike was startled by the sound of a heavy footfall in the doorway. And swivelled his chair to face beefy, florid, heavy-jowled Hank Chittum. Until now, both partners had ignored his presence in town.

Chittum ran his eye around the office, an amused sneer playing over his heavy features. "Byson," he said bluntly, "I reckon we kind of underestimated you. You're a bull-headed cuss. But it won't get you nowheres—except maybe a plot in Boothill."

He flicked ashes from a black cigar, arrogant, sure of himself. "A man can get off on the wrong foot in this town, easy. Such as sidin' that squatter. You're a greener, fresh out of school, filled with some fine ideals about the sanctity of the law, and such drivel. You've got to learn that laws are made to be twisted around to suit cases. And it's us lawyers that do the twisting."

Ike said softly, "Go on; I'm listenin'."

"To put it cold turkey, I'm making you a final proposition. If you want to play along

with us, you can stay, and make some easy money. You can take Laz Tatum's place. With him drunk most of the time, he's getting too crude to push down folks' throats. In fact we might cut you in for fifteen percent, instead of the ten we've been doling out to Tatum." He paused.

Ike lowered his feet, stood up slowly. "And if I don't . . .?"

Chittum scowled, shrugged. "You can get out of town, or," significantly, "take chances on an accident happening to you. Want time to think it over?"

"Why," Ike said innocently, grinning as he moved unhurriedly to face the man, "Reckon I don't need time. In fact, here's yore answer right now—the only kind a law vulture of yore breed can savvy!"

Before the astonished lawyer sensed his purpose Ike's left hand clutched the lapels of his coat. His right grasped Chittum's belt at the rear, he propelled the spluttering man to the head of the stairs, and, with a shove and well placed kick, he sent Chittum plunging to the bottom where he sprawled, choking with rage.

It was seconds before the renegade lawyer found voice. Then, eyes hate filled, he shook a pudgy fist, snarled, "All right, law pup. We'll do our talking with guns from here on!"

Ike sensed that in acting rashly, he had unleashed the full power of a dangerous foe against him. And wasn't sure he liked it. But he'd gone too far to back down now, he told himself, stubbornly.

When he turned back into his office he dug out his worn belt and holstered gun. He walked downstairs, stared warily up and down the main street, before proceeding to the county recorder's office. He didn't know exactly what he expected to find there.

A shifty-eyed, hostile clerk grudgingly

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brought out the brief filed by Chittum & Dowdy in the case. It required some additional prodding to get a look at the map and title records. Ike studied them, made notes and a rough sketch of the map. With the case coming up in two days, he didn't have time to check with the land office in Austin. As far as he could determine, the map was authentic. It was yellow with age, dry, brittle. Yet, there was absent the pungent, musty odor of old documents.

He spent one of his precious dollars for lunch. After which he got his saddle gun and compass from his office, and handed his last two dollars to the liveryman for a sleepy-eyed old nag and battered saddle. As he rode out of town Ike saw the two hard case cowpunchers eying him furtively from the foot of Chittum & Dowdy's stairway. The thick-set one turned, disappeared up the stairway, the tall one hurried along off the street.

South from Booneville the trail followed the smooth valley floor for a few miles. On its west side the weathered, broken face of an escarpment lifted to the higher, rough, boulder strewn, canyon slashed plateau. Ike picked up the line of the old land grant easily by following his notes, and watching for landmarks.

Suddenly he stopped, whistled his astonishment.

He stared at the bleached bones of a buffalo head and horns, wedged tightly in the forks of a huge, very old live oak. And here, according to his map, the line veered southwest, slanting up the well-nigh impenetrable escarpment face. From here on progress was slow, tedious, hazardous. Frequently Ike was obliged to dismount, lead the horse over areas of precarious footing. Or detour for hundreds of yards around yawning chasms. And, the few markers of boulders in tree forks, or lightning scarred oaks could be either old or very recent. It was necessary to constantly consult compass and notes to follow the line.

At last he sat the jaded plug, faced across Long Lake, barred by the sheer hundred-foot precipice at his feet. He stared across two hundred feet of dizzy space toward a similar perpendicular wall on the opposite side. As far as he could see in either direction the canyon walls were equally steep, unscalable. A little smile of elation rippled his features, and his pulse quickened.

IT WAS almost sunset when he again descended to the valley floor. He rode warily, rifle across saddle pommel, eyes and ears alert, aware that Chittum's hired gun-slayers might strike swiftly. And this vigilance probably saved his life. He suddenly flung from saddle, to sprawl at the trailside, as the high-powered rifle roared. A slight movement atop a boulder high up the scarp had warned him.

Even so, lead had burned a searing path in his bunched shoulder muscles.

He contrived to sprawl facing his attacker, gun thrust in front of him, and lay motionless, trying to simulate the inert, shapeless mass of a man gunned down. The horse jogged off a few yards, stopped. An eternity passed as he flinched, in anticipation of a second shot. But it didn't come. Ages later Ike saw the crown of a sombrero lift cautiously above the boulder. But he was too trail wise to fall for that one. An old ruse, pushing a hat into view on gun barrel. After a minute it was withdrawn.

The hat reappeared slowly, a man's features took form under it. Still Ike waited. Next came a man's shoulders. And finally the bushwhacker's figure boldly emerged from ambush, stood silhouetted for several seconds against the twilight skyline.

Ike lined up his sights with extreme care and squeezed the trigger. The man screamed, dropped his rifle, clawed at right chest, toppled, and rolled down the scarp toward Ike.

He was writhing and moaning when Ike reached his side. It was the lanky hardcase with whom Beavers had tangled that morning.

He stared at Ike with terror filled eyes. "Git me to a doctor," he whined. "I ain't fit ten to die, yet."

"I guess you will," Ike said contemptuously. "I ain't movin' yuh unless you want to do some palaverin'."

The drygulcher grasped at the implied promise. "Hell, feller, I don't draw down tight-mouthed pay. I'll talk. I'll sing it, or write it down in po'try iffen you jest git me to a medico."

As Ike suspected men of his stripe were not hampered by any deep seated loyalties. "What yuh want to know?" he gasped, as Ike proceeded to cut away his shirt and make a rough bandage for the wound.

"Yuh work for Diamond Y?" he asked.

"Why, hell, no. Amos Tollison of the Diamond Y is a strictly square hombre. He does his own snake killin', but he does it in the open. Me, I'm Andy Akers, and I draw my gun pay from Chittum & Dowdy. And mister, they don't give a damn about Lazy Y, nor any other rancher, 'ceptin' to bleed 'em for fat law fees. They're playin' both ends ag'in' the middle, and cleanin' up plenty. Me and the other hands, we burn out nesters, scare 'em with close shots, or waylay 'em and beat 'em up. Then we skin a rancher's fattest steers and hang the hides on a nester's corral fence. That way we keep both sides riled. Meantime, Chittum and Lafe Dowdy work on the town folks, playin' on their natural prejudices. Laz Tatum's in their pay, too. They planted the ideer among folks that you're ax'ly a snoopin' gov'ment detective, spyin' on folks, and it put a sour taste in their mouths."

The garrulous, weak willed renegade's talk, aimed to save his ornery life, made many things clear to Ike. He swiftly revised his plans.

He brought Aker's horse, loaded him on, sent the hired livery crowbait homeward with a slap on the rump, and climbed up behind the drygulcher. They rode to Beaver's soddy and log house. Akers readily agreed to testify in court upon Ike's promise not to push attempted murder charges against him. They put him to bed and Beaver's wife efficiently dressed his shoulder wound.

Ike spent the following day calling on homesteaders located in the disputed area.

DAWN of the following morning found Ike and Beavers headed for Booneville in the latter's covered wagon. Akers rode on a cot under the sheet, two homesteaders guarding him. Other homesteaders followed, in rigs and by horseback. They were on hand when court opened at nine.

Ike grinned at Chittum's flustered disappointment when he espied him. He blinked, jaw sagged, started to speak, changed his mind. Ike guessed that the riderless livery horse had convinced Chittum that his murder plan had succeeded. And Ike's unexpected appearance was momentarily flustering.

But, shortly afterward when he presented his case, his suave and arrogant confidence had returned. He knew the jury of cowmen and merchants was on his side. Ike, on the other hand, had challenged them only casually, aware that any man selected, not a homesteader, would be biased in advance. He knew he had to gamble on that hard-bitten, sour-visaged,

poker-faced old Circuit Judge, Henry Crowder. And he wasn't sure about that crusty old coot, by any means. Some of these old mossy horn jurists, reared on the range, could be pretty "set" in their convictions.

Chittum presented the map, emphasized its origin, and dramatized the fact that through the years the great State of Texas had honored these old Spanish Land Grants. He injected a bit of humor at how the shrewd churchman had outsmarted the simple old king. He pictured the hardships of the pioneering cowmen, hewing a domain from the wilderness. And ended with sarcastic barbs at the audacity of this snooping, wet-eared fledgling, a furriner, daring to impugn the honor of the heroes of the Alamo.

Ike couldn't see the connection with the Alamo heroes, but he knew it was a clever jury speech. Chittum leered triumphantly toward Ike as he sat down.

Ike looked at tobacco-shawing old Judge Crowder. His face was immobile, emotionless. He still couldn't tag him.

Ike got up nervously. He knew he faced a hostile courtroom. One after another he called six homesteader's to the stand to testify as to the physical characteristics of Long Lake canyon. Then he began: "Gents, your honor, and the court," he said, "I'm just an ignorant old cowpoke gone astray, by workin' my way through to a law sheepskin. I'm still purty shy on law knowledge, and I got a long way to go before I'll be as smart as honorable counsel for plaintiff. But I reckon I do know how fur a hoss can jump. And I have yet to see one that can fly. Consequently, I submit that sworn testimony of witnesses proves that this old map

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is either a fake or a big mistake. It proves that no man and hoss, either with or without a draggin' cowhide, could cross Long Lake canyon at the point designated; nor anywhere nigh that vicinity. I claim this contest is a farce, an insult to this court, and to the intelligence of fairminded men. Another thing—"

"I object!" Chittum roared, leaping to his feet. He suddenly saw the jaws of his own trap opening to receive him.

"Objections overruled!"

IKE could feel the tension in the room. He sensed, in the low drone of voices in the court, the changing sentiment. He saw a large man whom he judged to be Amos Tollison of Diamond Y, who had up until now sat with a puzzled, indifferent look on his face, turn to glare wrathfully toward Chittum.

Judge Crowder pounded his gavel. "Order in the court room!"

"Furthermore," Ike resumed, "Why would a man, ridin' against time, bent on corralin' as much land as possible, veer off from a smooth trail, to take off through busted up country, where he had to walk and lead his hoss, to reach a Lake he couldn't even cross? Or maybe history is wrong. Maybe that was one of them Magic Carpets he drug, instead of a cowhide. Or was he forkin' that Pegasus bronc, with wings, we read about in school?"

Ike lifted his voice. "One more witness!" It was an agreed signal. Two homesteaders pushed through the door, bearing the cringing Akers on his cot.

"A sneak hired to backshoot me, by plaintiff's lawyers!" Ike shouted above the din. "A man who'll swear to a dirty conspiracy, not only to rob the ranchers and persecute the homesteaders but to use you Booneville citizens to further his greed for money."

Judge Crowder struggled to his feet, white faced. "Case dismissed!" he thundered. And then, pointing a shaking finger at Chittum and the bony, hawk-faced Dowdy, he roared: "Arrest those men. This is the most contemptible outrage I've ever witnessed in a court room."

Hank Chittum lost his head completely then.

He glared wildly about, face black with hate. As the bailiff approached to carry out the bench warrant, he leaped backward, hand dived under arm, came out with snub-nosed gun. He sent one shot thudding into the helpless form of Akers, turned and triggered another shot toward Ike.

Winning at the bite of hot lead, Ike was slammed backward, caught by a pair of strong arms. He saw Dowdy overpowered as he tried to leap from an open window. Vaguely, he heard the roar of a gun close to his right ear, and, as through a mist saw Chittum grab for his saggy paunch, stumble forward a step, sag to the floor.

It came to Ike then that he was being supported by big Amos Tollison, and that it was he who had sent lead crashing into Chittum.

Amos Tollison's deep voice rumbled: "Folks, I've suspected these skunks of some sort of skullduggery lately, but I couldn't find proof. You all know Diamond Y, and mighty few other ranchers like dirty poker. But it took a gawky, bow-legged cowpuncher turned lawyer to show us how we've all been made fools of. Me, I've known we couldn't expect to hold out against the farmers all along. And we can work together."

There was no doubting the man's sincerity.

He carried Ike to a bench, laid him down. "Get a doc in here, dang it! Diamond Y's just lost two shysters, and we can't afford to take chances on losing this young squirt."

Booneville folks, Ike saw swimmingly, were crowding around the bench. And the unspoken things he read in their eyes shouted louder than any shamefaced words they could have voiced.

"Son," Amos Tollison growled, "since you've plumb ruined what we've been using for legal talent, the least you can do is take their place. Providin', of course, we can agree on a satisfactory retainer's fee."

Even with the stabbing pain in his shoulder, Ike felt like one big, happy grin from head to foot. "Booneville," he heard himself mumbling weakly, "strikes me as being an up and coming town; a good town and a good people a man can feel proud to grow up with."

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Big Book Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1945. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 363-W-6, this 22nd day of October 1945. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 363-W-6. My commission expires March 30, 1946. [Seal—Form 8526—Ed. 1933.]



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Chapter I

TROUBLE AT GOLD LAKE

THERE had been no firing from the boulders below the rimrock since mid-morning. The Snakes had been beaten back when they'd charged Chauncey Connors' Gold Lake store at dawn. Perhaps they had gone, Spur Trisson thought, as he reached down to his gun belt and counted again the loaded cartridges in the loops. Five. That was all. Just five and the three in his gun.



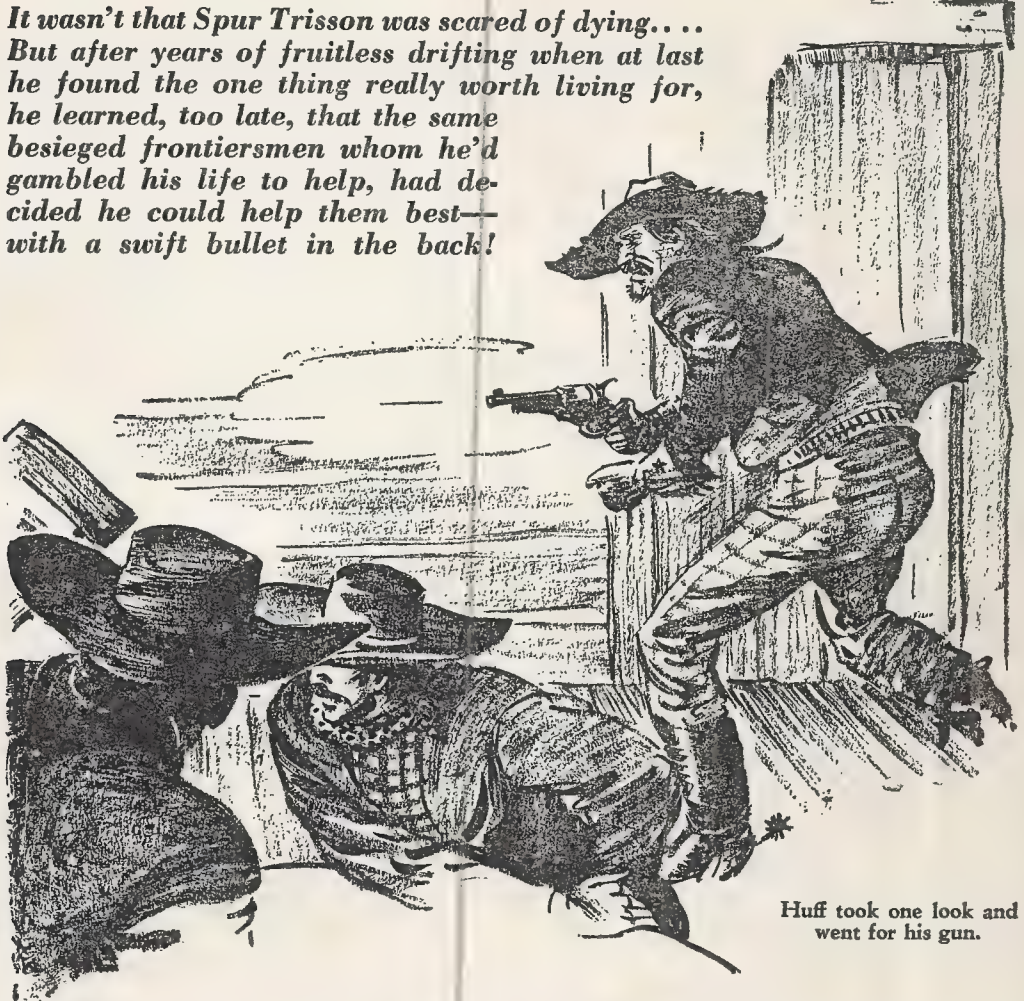
For a moment Spur took his eyes from the chink between the logs, and looked across the room at gray-bearded Chauncey. The old man grinned, and asked, "You see any sign of them red devils, son?"

"No," Spur answered. "Reckon they've pulled out?"

"No use hoping for a miracle," Pete Niler growled. "They'll wait till dark, and then

ALL GUTS— NO BRAINS!

*It wasn't that Spur Trisson was scared of dying...
But after years of fruitless drifting when at last
he found the one thing really worth living for,
he learned, too late, that the same
besieged frontiersmen whom he'd
gambled his life to help, had de-
cided he could help them best—
with a swift bullet in the back!*



Huff took one look and
went for his gun.

they'll burn us out like they was trying to do this morning. If we had any sense we'd git out o' here now!"

"Why, when they burn us out we'll dance in the light of the moon," old Chauncey said, "seeing as we won't have no place else to go. Right nice moon, ain't there, Spur?"

Spur caught Chauncey's wink. He winked back. "Sure," he said. "It's right nice."

That was like old Chauncey Connors. He'd wink at death, but Pete Niler and the rest of the men in the store were different. They had seen their cabins burn, their stock run off. They were about ready to quit.

Spur thought of Chauncey's granddaughter, Jenny, who was up in the loft with the women and the kids. Last night had been the first time he'd kissed her, and he hadn't been sure

whether she'd slap him or return his kiss. She hadn't slapped him.

Spur couldn't forget that kiss. He never would. He forgot about the Snakes in the boulders below the rimrock, forgot about the white man who lay so still out there in the dirt not far from the door of Chauncey Connors' log store, forgot about the smoldering ruins of the cabins that lay in a curved line along the lake shore. In that moment Spur Trisson's mind's eye reviewed a rather unsavory back trail.

Spur had never been a renegade like the fellow who now lay out there in the dirt with a bullet in his head. Spur had never robbed a bank. He'd never shot a man in the back. There were many bad things he hadn't done, but that wasn't exactly the point. Now he was wondering if he'd ever done anything good. To Spur Trisson life had been an easy-come, easy-go proposition. If things didn't break right, what the hell? There was always a good trail ahead.

It had been Spur's way when he met a pretty girl to kiss her and leave her. That had been before he'd kissed Jenny Connors. Something had happened to him. He didn't want to leave Jenny. Then he thought about the Snakes up there below the rimrock, he thought about the twenty shells they had left, he thought about the week's grub supply Chauncey had in the store. Right then and there Spur Trisson decided it was time he did something that was good. He had to balance an uneven scale.

SPUR thought about it awhile. Dying wasn't so bad. He'd been mighty close to it several times. However he couldn't see any percentage in dying unless he did somebody some good. Right now that somebody was Jenny. He could go up there among the boulders, and get shot in the guts. He could wait until night, maybe get a Snake or two, and lose his hair.

Then he thought about the man out there in the dirt, and he saw a chance to do something that would do some good. Having thought about it, Spur wasted no time. He holstered his gun, walked to the front door, and lifted the bar. He threw back his shoulders and patted his gun.

"What the hell . . ." old Chauncey howled, but Spur didn't wait to hear the rest of it. He went out of the store in a long-legged run. He'd get to the dead man all right, but whether he'd get back was another thing. Then, almost there, he knew he'd been a fool. He'd taken eight cartridges with him, cartridges that were needed badly. Too late now to think about that. He reached the dead man, started to unbuckle his gun belt, and discovered the fellow wasn't dead. The bullet

wasn't in the forehead. It had slashed his scalp, just low enough to knock him cold.

Spur didn't unbuckle the man's gun belt. He grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and started back, dragging the man behind him. The store seemed a mile away. They'd had plenty of time to get over their surprise now, time enough to drill a dozen holes in his hide. Then he was inside the store, his hide still intact, old Chauncey was shutting and barring the door, and roaring, "Of all the damned fool stunts I ever did see, that was the damndest and the foolishhest."

Spur ran a sleeve over his forehead, and winked at Chauncey. "I made a mistake, Chauncey, but I didn't think of it till I was plumb out there. I should have left my gun and belt in here. If they'd have got me, you'd have been out eight shells, and you're sure gonna need 'em."

They all looked at him, shaking their heads in amazement. Pete Niler was the first to speak, "He's got guts even if he ain't got brains. Chauncey, this hombre will get our hair lifted if he stays around here much longer. Why the hell don't you kick the fool out?"

Old Chauncey pretended not to hear. He poked a finger at the man on the floor. "What'd you bring that renegade's carcass in here for?"

Spur reached down and stripped the gun belt from the man. "Every loop full," he said, "and I reckon he's got some more in that gun. I didn't take time to pick up the gun he dropped. I'll go back after it."

"No you don't," Chauncey bellowed. "I say you've been fool enough already. We need shells, but we don't need 'em bad enough to get you killed." He looked down at the man, and scratched the bald spot on his head. "Say, this coyote ain't dead."

"He'll have a headache," Spur said, "when he comes around. I figgered mebbe he could tell us a few things. I don't know much about what's going on in these parts, but there sure is a smell of stink in the air when a white man shows up leading a pack of Injuns."

"Ain't no secret, Spur," a man said. "It's happened around here before. Reckon somebody wants our land, and this is one-way to scare us off if we don't get beefed."

"Who's that somebody?" Spur demanded. The man shrugged. "That we wouldn't know."

Spur sat down on a creacker barrel. He felt weak in the knees now. Pete Niler said he had guts and no brains, which might be about the size of it. He hoped Jenny hadn't seen his fool actions. He knew that Jenny admired brains.

Pete Niler, standing at a front window, said, "Chauncey, I ain't had a drink all day, but I

reckon I'm gonna need one now. Looks to me like that's Buck Bonstell riding up."

"Bonstell?" Chauncey began to swear jubilantly. "I reckon them Snakes have pulled out or they'd be plugging Bonstell."

"Not if he's their friend," Spur said. "Who's Bonstell?"

"He's got a store in Blue Springs," Chauncey said. "Don't get down here much unless he's got urgent business. Tried to buy me out last fall. Claimed I'd have trouble before summer, and he sure called it!"

"Then Bonstell's your man," Spur said simply, pulling his gun. "I'll get him."

"Behave," Chauncey said testily. "I'm running this shebang in case you didn't know. I reckon Buck Bonstell trades a little sharp, but he ain't no renegade. He's got the biggest store in Central Oregon, and he owns three, four little places between here and Lakeview. I'll go talk to him. He don't know what's happened."

"He can sure see what's left of the cabins," Spur said doggedly. "I'm going with you."

"Behave then," Chauncey growled. "Luke, you and Pete keep an eye on things. Pull that galoot," he jerked a thumb at the man on the floor, "back into the corner, and toss a blanket over him. I'll do the talking. We ain't telling Bonstell or nobody else that we're

out of shells. If it gets around, we'll get another rush. If Tug Willard don't get back from Blue Springs with the wagon load of supplies, we'll starve, but I ain't selling to Bonstell."

"I thought this Bonstell jigger was the fair-haired boy who mebbe trades a little sharp, but ain't no renegade," Spur said grimly. "Chauncey, what you say don't add up."

Old Chauncey reddened at that. "Shet up," he snapped as he unbarred the door and opened it, "and keep shet up." He stepped through the door, and watched Bonstell ride up. Then he said, "Buck, you're flirting with death if you got sense enough to know it. The Snakes have had us penned in here all day. Reckon they're still there below the rim. Don't know why they haven't plugged you."

BUCK BONSTELL was a big man with a heavy mustache that covered a meaty upper lip. There was a mean, short-tempered shine in his pale blue eyes that Spur didn't like. Bonstell shot a glance at the rimrock, and brought his gaze back to Chauncey. He said, "Hell, I wondered what had happened to the cabins. Hadn't heard the varmints was in the country."

Spur was convinced that Bonstell was play-

Many flashlight
batteries GO DEAD
just lying around-
BUT

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acting and behind this while dirty business.

"Might be they've pulled out," Chauncey said. "They can wiggle around in them rocks like snakes. Rightly named, them critters. Might be they've got around the point and high-tailed. They tackled us once early this morning, but we blistered 'em good."

Bonstell's eyes narrowed. "Get any of 'em?" he asked casually, and Spur grinned.

"Enough to plumb uncourage 'em," Chauncey said. "Better light a spell. You won't want to go on to Blue Springs tonight."

"I've got to," Bonstell said regretfully. "Reckon they're gone all right. They won't tackle another place short of fifty miles of here." He rubbed his blocky chin thoughtfully. "Chauncey, last fall I told you you'd have trouble here. I offered to buy you out, but you was fool enough to say no. Now you see how close you come to letting them varmints lift the hair off of your purty granddaughter. Mebbe you've changed your mind."

A red haze boiled through Spur then. Chauncey could talk along smooth. He could let Bonstell go on to plan another attack, but Spur Trisson had no such idea.

"You're a sneaky, back-shooting renegade, Bonstell. You planned this whole shebang, and your showing up here now and acting innocent-like don't go. You've got so damned much beef on your bones that these gents can't see through you, but I can. You wanted to buy Chauncey out last fall. When he wouldn't sell, you figger up a nice Injun fight to change his mind. Pull your iron, mister. You ain't riding out of here to plan another job like this one."

Buck Bonstell's face looked like a big thunderhead. He pinned his eyes on Spur, but he made no motion toward his gun. Then he looked at Chauncey, and he said evenly, "Who's the gabby kid, Chauncey?"

Chauncey was swearing under his breath. Pete Niler had shoved a gun muzzle into Spur's spine. He said, "Don't start anything, you hair-brained fool. Buck Bonstell's riding out of here without you going off half-cocked."

Spur swore. "Get that thing outta my back, and I'll show you. . . ."

"Shet up," Chauncey bellowed. "Hod dang it, Spur, I told you to keep your big mouth closed."

"Who is he?" Bonstell asked again.

"Name o' Spur Trisson," Chauncey said. "Just drifting through. Claims he likes the looks of the country, but mebbe it's Jenny's looks he likes."

"All guts and no brains," Pete Niler said sourly. "He's the kind o' jigger who does a hell of a wild trick and thinks afterwards, if he thinks at all."

Bonstell was scratching the tip of his chin, and the look he gave Spur was one a man

wouldn't forget. He said, "All right, Trisson, you're talking big here. I'll make no trouble. These folks have had enough, but I'll remember what you're saying. One of these days mebbe you'll show up in Blue Springs, and we'll take it up again." Then he looked at Chauncey. "How about selling? I'll put some men down here who don't have women. You've got no business staying here with Jenny."

"Our women take the same chances we do, Buck," Chauncey said stubbornly. "We ain't selling."

Bonstell shrugged. "The least you can do is to send Jenny into Blue Springs. I'll take care of her."

"She's staying here," Chauncey said. "Mebbe she'll come in later when the trail's open."

Bonstell shrugged. "If you change your mind, let me know." He turned his mount, and rode around the lake.

Pete Niler had removed the gun from Spur's back. Spur swung around to face him. "Pete, mebbe you're right about me being all guts and no brain. Still and all, I ain't like you. Leastwise in one way. I've got guts." Then he pushed past Pete and went on into the store.

Chapter II

THEY CAN'T BURN US OUT!

SPUR sat down again on the empty cracker barrel, and rolled a smoke. He was thinking there wasn't much in this world for folks who couldn't see past the end of their nose. That was why Chauncey Connors was trying to run a frontier trading post when he was an old man. He'd trusted too many wrong people. Spur didn't stir when the women came down, and cooked supper. Jenny came to where Spur sat. He said nothing and stared hard at the floor. There was no use, he thought, to love a girl that Buck Bonstell wanted, not with him broke flatter than a sage leaf, and Bonstell having all the money he could use.

"What's the matter with you?" Jenny demanded. "Maybe you've forgotten who I am. Maybe you think I'm just the girl you happened to pass when you was on a high lope, figuring you'd keep on riding."

Spur looked up then, and grinned. He couldn't help grinning. Jenny was the cutest thing he'd ever seen when she was angry. She was tiny, just about half his size, or so it seemed to him. She'd had to stand up on her toes when she'd kissed him last night. Her smoky blue eyes were dark now with anger, but not for long. Nobody could stay angry at Spur Trisson when he grinned.

"Honey," Spur said, "I was riding on a high lope till I got a good look at you, and then I turned around and I'm still here. Reckon mebbe I'll stay for a spell now." He sniffed audibly. "Say, that chuck smells good. Reckon you've been cooking it 'cause nobody else can make plain old fried potatoes and bacon take on a sweet smell like that. Why it's like perfume."

"Spur Trisson, you make me so mad." But she was smiling at him now. She saw the quick tension come into him, and instinctively her hand went out to his shoulder. "What is it, Spur?"

"I was just thinking," he answered, "how lucky we was to have you around to cook them old potatoes 'cause otherwise they'd just taste like potatoes." He grinned again, trying to hide the fear for her that was twisting its sharp knife in him. He added, "When you get done, I've got something to say that ain't for nobody's ears at all but them purty pink ones of yours."

"I'll bend them your way when it's time." She smiled at him again, and went back to the stove.

Spur watched her go, and thought Buck Bonstell could go to hell. Jenny Connors wasn't the kind of a girl to think about a man's money. Then Spur wished wistfully that he had at least a few silver dollars to jingle in his pocket when he told her what he aimed to.

It was after supper that Chauncey Connors made them all come to the front of the store and sit down. He stood before them, a gaunt, gray-bearded man on whom the weight of command weighed heavily.

"Folks," old Chauncey said, "we're in a hell of a gosh-awful fix, and we might as well look at it in the face. We didn't save much out of this mess, nothing but the store and the four horses we've got in the shed in back. Pete's been out looking around, and I reckon the red devils have vamoused. For how long I wouldn't guess. You boys can rebuild your

cabins, but chances are you'll lose 'em again if I'm guessing this right."

"Put it out in the open, Chauncey," Mrs. Niler said. "I've got my two brothers name o' Dan and Zane Rigdon coming down from Blue Springs to settle here. No use of them coming if they're just gonna get their hair lifted."

"I dunno how you can stop 'em, Mrs. Niler," Chauncey said gloomily, "if they're on their way. Here's the way I see it. Somebody, mebbe that huckleberry we've got tied up back there," he glared at Spur as if challenging him to name Buck Bonstell, "wants our land and this store. Wants it bad enough to get a pack of Injuns to jump us. Now who that skunk is I dunno, but if it ain't the jasper we've got, they'll try again. If they try before Tug Willard gets here with the load of supplies I sent him to Blue Springs for, they'll take us without no trouble. We've got grub to last a week, but we're out of ammunition. We couldn't beat off another rush like we got today."

OLD CHAUNCEY paced back and forth, pulling at his beard, his forehead furrowed.

"They couldn't get inside," Jenny said.

"They can burn us out," Chauncey snapped, "which same they aimed to do. I reckon they've pulled out for a spell, but they'll be back. I'm sure of it, and if we don't get some ammunition, our goose is cooked." He threw up his bony hands. "I dunno what's keeping Tug. I sent him more'n a week ago, and I haven't heard nothing from him. He should o' been back afore now."

"It's a hell of a grade out o' Antelope Canyon," Pete Niler said, "when the gumbo's wet, and it'd sure be wet this time of year with the snow going off. Better not count on Tug showing up for a week or more."

"Tug would get up that grade, gumbo or no gumbo," Chauncey growled, "if he knowed how bad we needed them shells."

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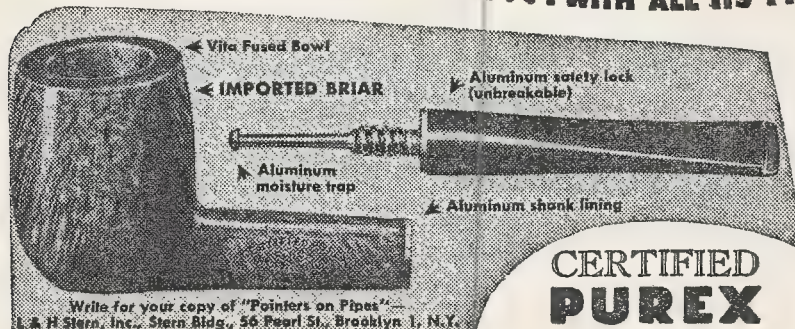
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"Who did you order the stuff from?" Spur asked softly.

"Bonstell," Chauncey said, "and you don't need to say what you're thinking. If it was Bonstell who's siccing that pack of red devils on us, he'd see to it that Tug don't never leave Blue Springs." Chauncey started pacing again, muttering in his beard as he strode back and forth across the room.

"Say it loud enough that we can hear, Gramp," Jenny said. "It's our scalps as well as yours."

"I say it can't be Buck Bonstell," Chauncey flung at them. "He can't be a renegade. He's got too much business around here to have a hand in a devil's brew like that. He's carried me on his books ever since I've been down here. If he wanted this place that bad he'd pushed me afore now. It's got to be . . . somebody like that heller we've got." Chauncey stopped pacing, his eyes fixed on the wounded man. "Pete, he's come around. Fetch him over here."

They carried him, Pete and Spur between them, and put him down on the floor in front of Chauncey. He was a wire-bodied man with a pair of tiny black eyes set closely astride a saber-sharp nose, glittering now with the fierce animosity of a captured animal.

"What's your name?" Chauncey demanded.

"Go to hell," the man said weakly.

Spur drew his gun, and eared the hammer back. "Chauncey," he said coldly, "I'm right sorry I brung this critter in here. I should o' plugged him out in front."

"It would have been a waste of lead," Chauncey said. "Don't waste any on him now, neither."

Spur eased down the hammer. "That's right," he admitted. "I'll just crack him on the noggin with the butt of this hogleg."

One of the women back of Jenny screamed. "Don't do it out here in front of our kids."

The man had been watching Spur as if trying to decide whether he meant to do what he threatened. He shot a quick glance at Pete Niler, and swallowed. He said, "You win. My name's Monte Huff. What else do you want to know?"

"Who put you up to this job?" Spur demanded.

"It's my idea," Huff snarled. "The Injuns don't like you down here. Neither do I. If you've got any sense you'll get out of here now."

"Then we ain't got any sense," Chauncey said.

"I'm about ready to pull out," Niler growled. "I've always had an idea I'd like to keep my hair on my head."

"I'll buy you out," Huff said eagerly. "There's makings of a good cattle outfit here along the lake."

"There would be," Chauncey said grimly, "but we ain't leaving."

"I heard you say you didn't have enough shells to hold off another attack," Huff said. "You hang around here, and you'll sure get it."

"Mebbe not if they don't know we're out of ammunition," Spur said. "Chauncey, there's just one chance. I'm riding to Blue Springs, and I'll get that wagon up the Antelope Creek grade if I have to tie wings on the horses."

"He's got the guts to do it too," Pete Niler said grudgingly. "If you had the brains of a chipmunk, you'd get out and stay out. You don't own nothing."

Spur felt Jenny's eyes on him, felt the fear that was in her. He grinned, "Shucks, it won't be nothing. We'll be back in two, three days."

"You look for my brothers in Blue Springs," Mrs. Niler said. "Name o' Dan and Zane Rigdon. Tell 'em to stay there till the trouble's over."

"I'll tell 'em to get here as fast as they can," Spur snapped. "If they're any good I reckon they'll come a-running."

"All right," Chauncey said reluctantly. "I reckon you're just the kind of a crazy galoot who might do it. Keep a tight hold on your hair, son. Go along with him to the shed, Pete, and help him saddle up. Better holler at Gabe. He's standing guard out there. Might figger you was a Snake."

Spur stood looking at Jenny Connors, eyes storing in him the memory of her. Then Chauncey unbarred the door, and Spur and Pete slipped through. Five minutes later Spur let his big black gelding out of the shed. Jenny was waiting for him.

Spur moved to her, slipped an arm around her slim waist, and stood looking down at the pale oval of her face. "Don't go, Spur," Jenny pleaded. "Maybe Tug will get in with the wagon."

"He won't get in," Spur said. "Not if Buck Bonstell's the caliber of polecat I think he is." He paused, then added, "I was aiming to tell you something but I reckon it'll have to wait till I get back."

She clung to him, her arms around his neck, her voice a sweet whisper. "Tell me now so I'll know what you're going to say when you get back. The moon's big and full."

"I love you."

"That's what I was hoping it would be, Spur."

Spur kissed her, and he felt the sweetness of her lips, the tightness of her arms around him. He left her then, and rode rapidly around the lake. The memory of that kiss was in him. It would start a song in his heart that would last all the way to Blue Springs, and back again . . . if he came back.

Chapter III

THE DEVIL'S SIGN

SPUR rode fast the first part of the night. Then, having crossed the desert and reached the pines of Cradle Mountain, he lost the trail. He sat his saddle for a time, cursing his ignorance of the country, and realizing the folly of going ahead. He made a cold camp, slept until dawn, and then, taking his directions from the bald peak of Cradle Mountain, rode north until he reached a brawling, muddy creek that he took to be Antelope Creek. An hour later he found the trail.

At noon Spur came to the canyon, Antelope Creek had dug between steep, gumbo-covered hills. Less than a mile below him he could see the scattered buildings that made up the settlement of Blue Springs. As he rode down the grade, he saw why Pete Niler had said it would be tough to get a wagon out of the canyon this time of year. The grade wasn't steep, and in cold weather when the ground was frozen, it would be no great task, but now with the snow barely off and the ground thawed, it would be next to impossible.

Was it impossible? Spur asked himself that question as his black slowly plodded through the sticky mass. The road was narrow, often sloping toward the edge. Graded wrong, Spur thought grimly. Where gravel had been hauled the road had a firm underlayer, but over it the gumbo had formed a grease-like surface. With only inches between the wheels and the edge, it would be close to a miracle if the wagon didn't skid, and go plunging into Antelope Creek more than one hundred feet below.

Through some expert maneuvering he had reached the bottom of the grade, the canyon widened out into a mile-broad valley, and Spur was in Blue Springs.

It wasn't much of a town. A half dozen buildings were strung along the one street, the biggest a long, log structure with Buck Bonstell's name across the front. On both sides of the business block were the houses, most of them shacks. It looked to Spur as if Blue Springs was Buck Bonstell's town, and if he'd sized the man up right, he'd be fighting more than gumbo before Chauncey Connors' wagon got to the top of the Antelope grade.

Spur turned in at the public stable, and asked, "You seen Tug Willard lately?"

"Sure," the stableman said. "He's been in town most of a week now."

"Where'll I find him?"

"Likely in the Starlight."

"Know a couple gents named Rigdon?"

"Yep. They're pilgrims going south. Talking about settling in the Gold Lake country. Been held up on account of the Antelope

Creek grade. They've got a couple of heavy wagons they don't reckon can pull out o' the canyon."

"Where'll I find them?"

"In the Starlight. Everybody in this burg hangs out in the Starlight when they ain't working."

Spur turned, and started to walk away. Then he remembered that Buck Bonstell had left Gold Lake not long before he had, and he wondered if Bonstell had come back to town yet. He asked carelessly, "You reckon Bonstell'd be down there, too?"

"Chances are he's still sleeping. He . . ." Then the stableman stopped, suspicion showing in his sleepy eyes. He asked craftily, "What do you want to know about Buck for?"

"I want to see him. You said everybody hung out in the Starlight when they wasn't working, and I was wondering about him." Spur glanced up at the noon high sun. "Ain't he sleeping a little late?"

"I don't know what he's doing," the stableman muttered, and led Spur's black into a stall.

THE STARLIGHT had a rough, pine bar along one side. Three men were sitting at a table beside a side window. One of them was Chauncey Connors' freighter, Tug Willard, who looked surprised when he saw Spur. The other two were strangers, but they looked much like Mrs. Niler, and Spur guessed they were her brothers, Dan and Zane Rigdon.

Tug Willard was an oldish man with tomcat whiskers and faded blue eyes. He had been with Chauncey for a long time. He watched Spur come to the table where he sat. Then, as Spur pulled back a chair and sat down, Willard asked a little uneasily, "What brings you up here, Trisson?"

"Trouble," Spur snapped. He pinned his eyes on Willard's whiskery face, and added, "You're a yellow, double-crossing skunk, Tug."

The freighter looked as if he'd been hit with a fist. For a moment he sat motionless as if not believing he'd heard right. Then he was on his feet, and reaching for his gun. "Nobody calls me that. You gonna get up and take this slug in your guts, or are you gonna sit there and get it between the eyes?"

"Sit down," Spur said testily, "and answer me a question. Why ain't you got that wagon of yours back to Gold Lake before now?"

"I can't git it up the Antelope Creek grade," Willard bellowed, "which same any damned fool oughtta know who's rode down it. Now reach. . . ."

"Sit down," Spur repeated. "If you drill me, there'll be one less gun talking the next time the Snakes hit Gold Lake."

Tug Willard's hand dropped away from gun

butt. Slowly he sat down, words jolted out of him without thought. "The Snakes hitting Gold Lake, and Chauncey without much grub."

"That's it," Spur breathed, "and all the time you're sitting up here, playing poker and lapping up Buck Bonstell's whiskey when you oughtta been on the trail." He put his eyes on the other two then. "I'm guessing you're Mrs. Niler's brothers. Dan and Zane Rigdon, she said your names was."

"That's right," the big one said. He motioned with a hairy hand to his brother. "He's Dan. I'm Zane. What's this about Snakes?"

"They hit us before sunup yesterday," Spur said, watching Tug Willard as he talked. "It wasn't a big band, but there was enough of 'em to burn the cabins, and keep us penned up for a spell. We fought 'em off, and mebbe got a few. Hard to tell how many we plugged 'cause they packed 'em off. Funny thing was we got a white man who was leading the pack. They was working up close, keeping in the rocks, and this jigger aimed to fire the store, but we got him. He wasn't dead, and I reckon Chauncey'll make him talk before he's done. There's something going on I can't figger out, but looks like somebody egged them red devils on, figgering to run us out so they could take over. That's mighty good land along the lake, and one of these days when some more settlers come in Chauncey'll have a store that'll make him a lot of money."

"That's right," Willard said dully. "Reckon I'd better get to rolling. If they get Chauncey and Jenny. . . ."

Tug Willard didn't finish, but the look on his face was not that of a man who had sold out an old friend.

"You won't roll far," Zane Rigdon said. "Not the way the road is."

"I could get up that grade if I had enough horses," Willard muttered, "but my team couldn't pull a loaded wagon through that gumbo. How about you boys hitching on?"

Zane Rigdon shook his head. "No," he said flatly. "We ain't budging till our horses are good and rested. They was all played out hauling our stuff up from the Columbia. It'll be another week afore we put 'em into harness again."

For the first time Spur studied the Rigdon brothers. Zane was a big man, bigger than Buck Bonstell, with a square chin and a thin-lipped, cruel mouth that hadn't smiled since Spur had come in. The other one, Dan, was a head shorter, but nearly as thick of shoulder. He had the same square chin that characterized his brother Zane and Mrs. Niler, but his eyes were different. Zane's and Mrs. Niler's were brown; Dan's were green, and filled with a shrewd, wild cunning.

It was Dan who said, "Hell, man. I don't see no use getting worked up over this. Them Snakes are probably more'n a hundred miles away by now and going fast if you gave 'em a licking like you say you did."

"It's your sister and brother-in-law who'll be starving along with the rest of 'em," Spur pointed out. "Seems damned funny to me you wouldn't let Tug have your horses long enough to pull his wagon up the grade."

Dan laughed harshly. "I know my sister and I know Pete. They'll make out. Pete'll go out and get himself a deer. Hell, they won't starve. I'm not sure I'll go on anyhow. If the Snakes are gonna get playful, I'd just as soon settle around here."

"They been over part of the trail on horses," Tug Willard told Spur, "and they say the trail's in a hell of a fix." He shook his head. "I know what it's like when it starts thawing this time of year. I was hoping I'd get back when it was still froze, but I didn't. I've got the wagon all loaded, and ready to roll, but it sure looks like I'll be sitting here till that gumbo dries up some." He brightened then. "Mebbe it won't be so bad, Spur. A day or so of dry wind, and that stuff gets hard mighty fast."

A DAY or so might be too late. Spur didn't say anything about how much ammunition was left in Chauncey's Gold Lake store. There wouldn't be any shells for Pete Niler to use for hunting. He didn't say that, either. He asked, "Has Bonstell got any ready horses, Tug?"

"Yeah," Willard said. "Sure. He hauls all the supplies that his stores down there in the desert use. If I could get my wagon to the top, I could get on to Gold Lake."

"Where is Bonstell?" Spur asked.

"In his store likely. Let's go see him, Spur."

Dan Rigdon laughed again, the same harsh, humorless laugh Spur had heard come from him before. He said, "You gents are wasting your breath if you figger Buck Bonstell will give you a hand. If some white was behind that Injun attack, I'm betting it was Bonstell. Who do you reckon would move in and set up a store at Gold Lake when Connors pulled out? It'd be Buck Bonstell, and you can bet your bottom dollar on that."

"Get up, Rigdon, and say that to my face."

Buck Bonstell had just come down the stairs. He stood in the back of the room now, his eyes narrowed and mean. Slowly Dan Rigdon got up and moved away from the table, watching Bonstell warily. He said, "I don't reckon we've got any real cause to swap lead for, but if that's what you've got in mind, I ain't one to sit quiet-like, and get in in the belly."

"I heard the same talk," Bonstell growled,

"out o' that loud-mouthed kid," he nodded at Spur, "and I let it go 'cause the folks at Gold Lake had enough trouble, but I ain't standing for it here, and when I get done with Rigdon, I'll let young Trisson speak his piece if he's a mind to."

It was a quick and unexpected turn of things. Spur was on his feet, eyes on Bonstell, not quite understanding what was happening. He said, "Mebbe I was wrong, Bonstell. There's one way to tell, and if I was, I'll sure eat crow right here and now. They're out o' grub at Gold Lake. Tug here has got to get his wagon up the Antelope Creek grade, and with the gumbo what it is he ain't got the horsepower to do it. How about letting him have enough horses to pull his wagon to the top?"

Bonstell didn't answer. Not then, because the barkeep was looking out of the window, and saying, "Buck, Monte Huff's coming into town hell-bent—"

"Huff?" Zane Rigdon shouted. "Why, I thought . . ."

"Shut up," Dan grated.

Spur was half way across the room when the batwings opened and Huff came in. Spur asked coldly, "How'd you get away, Injun man?"

Huff took one look, saw who it was, and went for his gun. He brought it up in a quick, smooth draw, hammer back, but not quick enough, for Spur cut him down with one bullet. Huff took one uncertain step toward Spur, gun dribbling from lax fingers. Then he broke at waist and knee, and sprawled full length in the sawdust.

Spur stepped past him through the batwings, saw Chauncey Connors' roan in the street. "What reason did you have for that?" Bonstell demanded when Spur came back into the saloon.

"That renegade son was the coyote we got when the Injuns hit us," Spur said. "You saw he didn't waste no time going for his gun when he saw me."

"Mebbe you're lying," Dan Rigdon said coldly. "Mebbe it was you who figgered up the Injun scrap, and you didn't want Huff to talk."

"Go look at the roan he was forking, Tug," Spur said, and when the freighter had taken his look, Spur asked, "Who's is it?"

"Chauncey's," Willard said quickly. "If he wasn't a renegade, he oughtta be shot for horse-stealing."

"How about it, Bonstell?" Spur demanded. "Tug says he's ready to roll if he had the horses to get up the grade."

Buck Bonstell nodded, eyes hard on Dan Rigdon. "How about your big talk, friend? You still claiming I'm the huckleberry who made all the hell for Gold Lake?"

Dan Rigdon shot a glance at his brother. The big Rigdon shrugged. He said, "We've got enough trouble, Dan."

"I reckon so," Dan Rigdon said easily. "I'll eat my words. I say there's something rotten here, and I don't know nothing about this jigger Trisson just beefed, but I'm saying mebbe Trisson is the one we're after."

Chapter IV

SATAN WEARS A MASK

AT THE stable Bonstell stood beside Spur while the horses were being harnessed. Then, as Spur hitched Chauncey's roan behind the wagon, Bonstell said, "I couldn't have helped Huff get away, could I, Trisson?"

Spur's smile was a quick break across his bronzed face. Then it faded, leaving his face dark and forbidding. "I reckon not. There's a traitor down there at Gold Lake, and he's the one, whoever he is, that let Huff go." He looked Bonstell squarely in the face. "I love Jenny Connors. If anything has happened to her, I reckon there wouldn't be much in me living. Seems like all my life I've looked for her. Now I've found her, and mebbe she's dead. If you've had any hand in it, I'm coming back after you."

"I had no hand in it," Bonstell said. "Reckon I'd better ride back with you. Looks to me like maybe the Rigdon boys are behind this. They've been out of town a couple of days. There's a good chance they was down there with Huff and the Injuns."

"You keep an eye on them hombres," Spur said. "I'll handle anybody at Gold Lake who needs handling." He rode away, then, after Tug Willard's creaking wagon. He did not look at Bonstell who had mounted, and reined his horse in beside him.

There was food in the wagon, new guns, clothing, and plenty of ammunition. Spur had looked. He could not help Willard, and the old freighter needed no help. Wheels moved into the gumbo. The heads of the horses were down; their weight against the collars. Willard's whip cracked. The wheels slowed, but they didn't stop. They turned slowly, gumbo hanging to them with thick, tenacious fingers, a terrible and vicious force of nature allied with renegade whites. The miles past this Antelope Creek grade were nothing. It was fought out here where every foot gained was a victory, every foot equal to a mile on the desert.

Old Tug Willard's whip cracked again, and then again. He talked, urged, cajoled, and cursed. Foot by foot the wagon rolled up the grade, the covered top careening as wheels dropped into ruts, or as it hit a graveled, gumbo-covered piece and skidded perilously close

to the edge. The top of the grade was far away, then it was closer, and then the wheels weren't so deep in the sucking gumbo, and rolling along hard ground to the top. Breath went out of Buck Bonstell in an audible sigh. "I didn't think the old boy would make it. He's mighty damned good with the lines."

Half an hour later Willard pulled up and got down. He wiped his face with a dirty bandanna, and stared at the drying gumbo still hanging to the wheels. "I've put a wagon through some tough places, but this ties anything I've ever done." He grinned at Spur. "You ride on, son. Tell old Chauncey I'll be along."

"I'll take my horses back," Bonstell said. "You'd better do like Tug says, Trisson. They might be needing another gun at Gold Lake." He hesitated, eyeing Spur, and then added, "One thing we see alike, friend. I've been loving Jenny Connors ever since old Chauncey set up his store. I've been carrying him on my books because of her. Someday mebbe he'll pay out. I dunno, but I'll keep on carrying him because Jenny . . . well, because Jenny is the kind of a woman a man dreams about. It won't ever be nothing but a dream for me, but the dream is worth having. She's been waiting for a young jasper like you with a loud tongue and a lot of guts. She's yours, son. Make her happy. You wouldn't have got these horses if it hadn't been for that girl."

Spur shook hands with Buck Bonstell before the trader started his horses back down the grade. He wasn't sure he should. He wasn't sure whether Bonstell was a slick renegade all the way who put out a good act, or whether he really had done what he had for Jenny. But Spur did shake Bonstell's hand, and he didn't see the mean, short-tempered shine in the big man's eyes he had when he'd faced him in front of old Chauncey's store.

Spur broke out a box of shells, and filled his saddle bags. He said, "They'll have grub till you roll in, Tug, but they'll need these shells. Keep them wheels turning, fella." Spur lifted a hand, grinned at whiskery old Tug Willard, and reining his black around, took his bearings from the bald top of Cradle Mountain, and rode south.

THE hard push of frantic urgency was in Spur Trisson on that ride. He was tired, he was hungry, and he was sleepy, but he didn't stop except to let his horse rest. He was through the pines and well across the desert by the time it was dark.

Spur could push his horse only so hard. Finally Spur rode down the long slope of the hills into the pocket that held Gold Lake.

Spur left his horse some distance from the

store, and carrying his saddle bags, wormed his way toward the store. He had no proof against Pete Niler or the Rigdon boys, but that proof would be here at Gold Lake. He crouched outside the door of the store, trying to hear the talk inside, and was unable to make out more than an occasional word. He recognized Chauncey's voice, and Pete Niler's. Then he thought he heard Zane Rigdon.

Suddenly old Chauncey shouted a curse. "To hell with you hombres," he roared. "I tell you I'm staying."

Spur didn't know what was going on, but he thought it was time he was taking a hand. He eased his gun in leather, and pounded on the door. Jenny opened it. Spur gave her a quick grin, and slid past her. Chauncey was standing at the end of the counter, bearded face filled with a hard and biting anger. Pete Niler was standing ten feet away from him, lean back against the counter, thumbs hooked in gun belt. The Rigdon brothers were in the center of the store, their faces showing their surprise when they saw Spur. The rest of the men of Gold Lake were sitting around the stove in the back of the room, apparently indifferent to the argument that was going on. The only other woman in the room besides Jenny was Mrs. Niler.

Spur tossed the saddle bags to Chauncey. "There's enough shells there to hold the Snakes off for a spell. Tug's on his way with plenty of grub." He stood so that he could watch the Rigdons and Pete Niler. He jerked a thumb at the Rigdons, and asked, "You know who them hombres are, Chauncey?"

"They said their name was Alexander," Chauncey said. "I dunno nothing about 'em except that they showed up here with some dinero, and they've bought everybody out but me. They've been trying to tell me they'll run me out if I don't sell, but I say let 'em run. I'm staying."

Spur grinned. That was like Chauncey. He started to tell who they were, but before he could say anything, Zane Rigdon burst into a string of curses. He pointed a stubby finger at Spur. "This is the sneaking son who's done all the dirty work. He's the one who put the Snakes up to this attack."

"I've got some news, Chauncey . . ." Spur began.

"Don't believe nothing he says," Zane Rigdon shouted. "I tell you he's the cause of all your trouble. We've bought this land, and we don't aim to be fighting Snakes all the time. Unbuckle your gun belt, Trisson. We're taking you to the county seat, and you'll hang."

"Shut up, and let me talk," Spur snapped. He'd been in a good many tight spots in his time, but never a tighter one than this. He couldn't count on any of the men in the back. Probably not Chauncey. That made the odds

three to one, but it had to go this way. "You jaspers can pull your irons any time you want to, but I ain't letting go of my gun belt. You see how it is, Chauncey. They don't want me to talk. I reckon they thought I'd stay with Tug. They must have got fresh horses, and pulled out of Blue Springs right behind me. How long have they been here, Chauncey?"

"An hour or more." Chauncey Connors was staring at Spur, not fully aware of what was coming. "You say Tug's on his way?"

"Yeah, he's on his way all right. Buck Bonstell let him have the horses it took to pull his wagon through the gumbo, so I reckon that makes you right about Buck. He didn't have nothing to do with this business."

"I knew that," Chauncey said with satisfaction.

"What I want to know is how did Monte Huff get away?"

"I don't know. Pete was standing guard when it happened. Seems like Huff got the ropes off his hands, and cracked Pete on the head with his gun."

"The rest of you was sleeping?"

"I reckon so," Chauncey said in deep disgust. "I've been thinking Huff would have his Snakes here by now."

"Huff's dead," Spur said quickly. "I shot him today in Blue Springs. Them hombres," he jerked a thumb at the Rigdon brothers, "are Mrs. Niler's brothers she was talking about, and along with Pete are the renegades we want. The whole ruckus was to get everybody to sell out cheap, and their showing up tonight proves it. I reckon they had a few breeds to pull some triggers. Anyhow them two was here. You'll remember we didn't see many Injuns."

"Lies," Pete Niler snarled. "All lies."

"You say Monte Huff slugged you on the head, Pete," Spur said softly. "Suppose you let Chauncey feel the bump you've got. Takes quite a crack to knock a man out like that. Hanging's a hell of a way to die, Pete, and that's what happens to . . ."

THAT was enough for Pete Niler. He pulled gun, and the Rigdon boys clawed for their Colts a scant second later. This was the way Spur expected it to go, and being ready, he had beaten Pete Niler to the draw. Niler took one bullet in his heart, and fell away from the bar. Zane Rigdon fired once, a shot that missed Spur's head by an inch. Then he spilled sideways with Spur's second bullet in his chest. That much Spur had thought he could do, but three were too many. He whipped his gun toward Dan Rigdon, and held his fire, for old Chauncey Connors had got into the fight in time to knock the smaller Rigdon off his feet.

Spur walked toward Mrs. Niler, gun still in his hand. He said, "You knew what was happening. Do you want to talk?"

The woman looked at the naked gun in Spur's hand, looked at her husband's still body, then at her brothers. Slowly she nodded. "I told them they would come to this sometime. It was Pete's idea to build a cattle ranch here and run the store. He got here too late to start it, so he thought of driving you folks off. It wasn't Indians who attacked yesterday morning. It was horse thieves dressed like Indians. My brothers knew them in Nevada. The horses were their pay. They're a long ways from here by now. My brothers thought the men would sell out cheap. That was why they came tonight, and if it hadn't been for Spur, I guess they would have got what they wanted."

Old Chauncey Connors swore. "They wouldn't have got what they wanted no such thing. I wasn't aiming to sell."

Mrs. Niler shook her head. "You don't know how far my brothers would have gone." She looked at Dan Rigdon, and saw him move. "Dan is alive. I'll do what I can for him. He's wanted in Nevada. It would have been better if he had been killed. Now they'll hang him."

Spur looked at the men in the back of the store who were getting up from the floor where they had flattened themselves when the shooting started. "I never saw a bigger bunch of yellow-bellied quitters in my life. A lot of help you were. I hope you move out, and keep going because I'm aiming to stay, and I don't like to have you around under foot. Now get busy, and get them carcasses out of here." Jenny was pulling at Spur's coat sleeve. He looked down at her in surprise. "What's wrong now?"

Jenny didn't answer. She pulled him toward the door, and opened it. "We've got some business out here, Spur," she said.

"Business?"

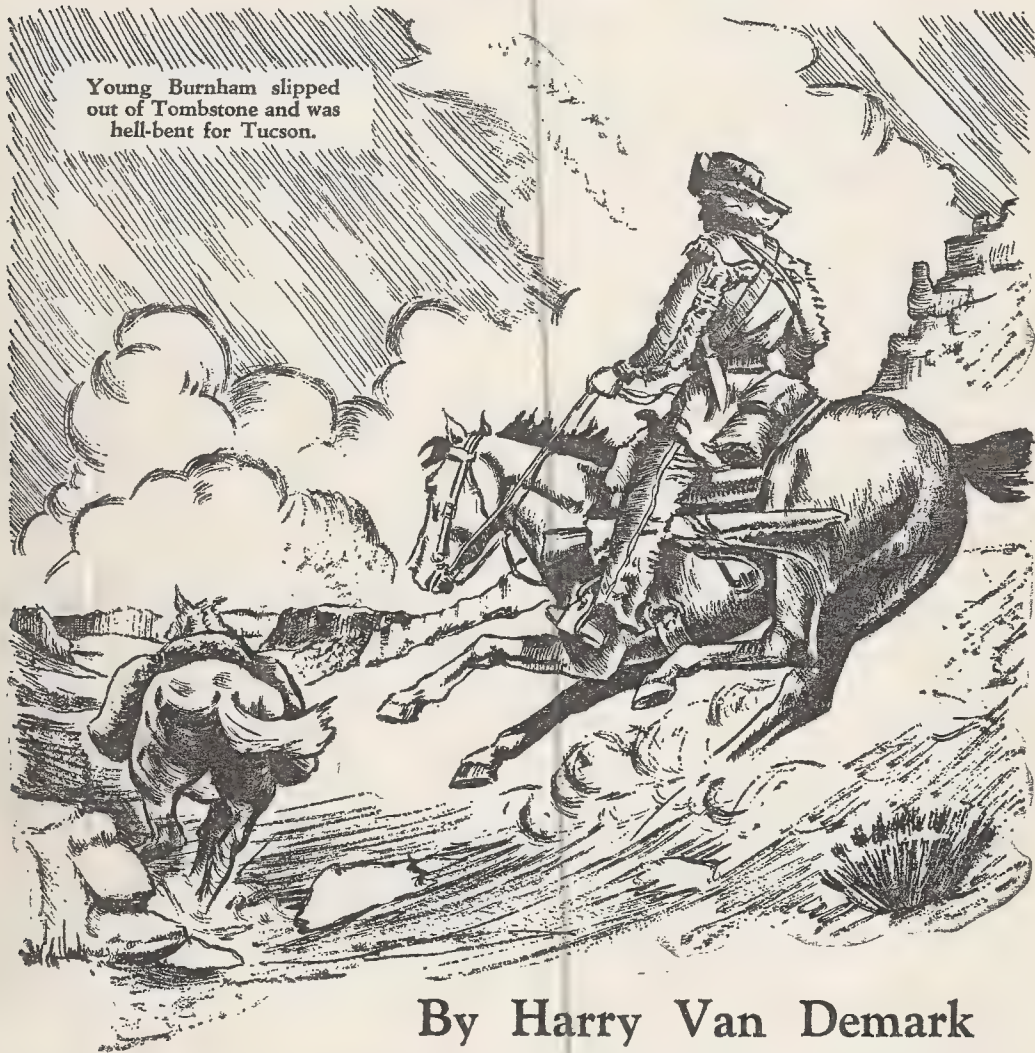
Jenny had closed the door, and they were walking toward the lake. "I've been waiting to hear what you were going to tell me when we got up on the rimrock with the moon on the lake and the big, black pine shadows all mixed up with the moonlight. There was something you were going to tell me when you returned."

"Oh yeah," Spur said as if he had just remembered it. "My horse is down here a piece. We'll ride up on the rimrock and I'll tell you all about it, but first there's one other piece of business that needs tending to right now." He stopped, and tilting her face up to his, kissed her. This was one pretty girl, he told himself, that he wasn't going to kiss and then leave.

Keep Your Scalp On!

The pioneer Western traveler who managed to keep his scalp when crossing savage-infested country owed a vote of thanks to Major Frederick R. Burnham—the frontier's greatest trail-blazer.

Young Burnham slipped out of Tombstone and was hell-bent for Tucson.



By Harry Van Demark

BACK in 1880, Major Frederick R. Burnham was just a youngster. But he had been knocking around the Southwest long enough to learn the ways of the mountains and the deserts.

It was in Arizona that he learned how to cover those mountains and those trails without leaving signs that could be read by the wily Apaches. Those were the days when the white

traveler seldom kept his hair unless he knew how to travel without leaving a trail.

For some time Burnham lived among friendly Indians, eventually won the confidence of a young brave and from him learned the tricks of the trail without which he would perhaps never have become world-famous as a scout.

Burnham had prospected for gold in the mountains, punched cows on the plains, car-

ried messages through country overrun with hostile Indians, and got himself embroiled in the notorious Tonto Basin war—all at that youthful age.

He had hardly got things fixed up with the law for some of the scrapes he got into during the Tonto Basin trouble before, as a result of his services to the law, he found himself hunted by the most daring cattle-rustling killers in Arizona.

Young Burnham was in Tombstone—the Tombstone of ancient glory, where the sixgun was still the most potent law.

The leader of a band of cutthroats was Sanchez Hambro, a half-breed Mexican. A big man, boastful, given to ornate headgear and quick on the trigger. Hambro was nevertheless a frontiersman of the first water, an expert tracker.

And this was the chap against whom young Fred Burnham, cooperating with the lawmen, was to give evidence at the next session of the district court in Tucson.

The young man was nervous. It was a very unhealthy situation. He didn't know of a single friend in Tombstone he could count on.

He had no horse, was afraid to buy one; for he knew from the whisperings that had come to him that if he left the settlement openly, Hambro and his killers would be close on his trail, to shoot him down in cold blood.

So there was nothing to do but stay put, make himself as inconspicuous as possible and hope for a lucky break.

He got the break with the arrival in Tombstone of one Angus McLeod.

Now old Angus was not any too savory a character himself. He bore the scars of many a knife and gun fight, had plenty of notches in the butt of his single action forty-five, drank hard liquor, made a good living smuggling goods in from Mexico, and from Europe, too, through the Gulf ports.

Take him all around, old Angus was rough, tough and hard to handle. But on one count he was a man four-square—he never let down a friend, never let a debt of either money or gratitude go unpaid.

And young Fred Burnham but a few weeks before had saved Angus' brother's life.

Considering this fact, old Angus acted in a mighty peculiar way on his return to Tombstone. He seemed to avoid the young man. But he had a good reason for this which soon became apparent.

"Don't seem too friendly with me," Angus hissed to Burnham out of the corner of his mouth when they passed on the street one day.

Burnham's eyes brightened. At least this was some encouragement. "What's the matter?" he inquired in an undertone.

"There's somethin' crooked goin' on around here, and I think I know what it is."

"You mean—"

"About you, yeah. But I'm goin' to get you out of it."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Act like you don't know me, then come up to my cabin tonight. And be sure nobody sees you come in."

Curious, but with a sort of nameless fear, Burnham kept the rendezvous.

The trail-wise old smuggler let him in, looked around to make sure they had not been seen, then led him into a back room where there was no light. And there in the dark he laid out a plan for Burnham to follow.

"This Hambro gang, they don't like you, son. And they're bound and determined you're goin' to stay around here where they can keep an eye on you. And if you're among the missin' witnesses when that trial comes up in Tucson—well, the Hambro outfit ain't goin' to do much weepin' about it. Now, as I take it, you'd be right happy if you could get over to Drippin' Springs?"

Burnham nodded. "That's right. I've got friends there. They'll help if I can reach them."

"Then we've got to reach 'em. Now listen carefully: Tomorrow you begin askin' openly about the trail to the Springs. At the same time you make *secret* inquiries about the trail to Tucson. Hambro will naturally expect you to head in the direction you ask secretly about—and he'll get the information right quick. His spies'll carry him word of what you're plannin' to do."

"And then I cross them up?"

"That's right. You head for Drippin' Springs."

THE following night the two held another conference. Late in the evening they thought they could slip into a little restaurant for a bit to eat. With McLeod in the lead, so as to give the impression that they were not together, they headed for the main street of the town.

They were just about to round the corner by the Silver Dollar saloon when someone opened a door. A bright light illumined the street.

McLeod halted abruptly, signaled Burnham to do the same. There, almost at the old smuggler's feet, limned by the yellow light, lay a menacing shadow. Just around the corner, the shadow revealed, were two figures—Sanchez Hambro and one of his men.

The big half-breed stood with his gun upraised, ready to throw it into action. McLeod did not stop to figure out how the desperado knew the pair were on their way toward that corner. He seized Burnham's arm, pulled him to one side. Quickly they dodged back to the rear of the saloon and vanished.

"Son, I reckon it's time you were slopin'," said old Angus. "No use to wait till they find out what's on your mind. Remember what you learned from the Indians. Leave the kind of a trail they can't foller by lantern or matches. That'll give you a night's start of 'em. The extra hoss shoes are in the saddle-bags. Get goin' now, and good luck to ye, lad!"

Two horses were awaiting young Burnham, one a fine steed, capable of traveling far and fast; the other a scrawny beast, unshod, but good enough for the role he was scheduled to play. Also the sorry nag had been selected for other special attributes.

Riding the good horse and leading the other Burnham slipped out of Tombstone, heading toward Pantano and Tucson.

At daybreak he halted on a rough, gravelly ridge, breakfasted on jerky and pinole. Then he rolled up his sleeves and went to blacksmithing. Quickly he removed the shoes from the good horse and put them on the poor cayuse.

From his saddle-bags he took a canvas sack, filled it with bits of cactus—made sure the spines protruded through the fabric. This prickly contrivance he tied securely to the inferior horse's tail. Then he gave the animal a slap with his hat and let out a whoop that would have done credit to a blood-crazed Indian.

The horse gave a wild leap. The cactus spines flapped around and jabbed him. He was off in a series of buck jumps, skittering all over the landscape. Finally he settled into a run, heading toward Tucson where his horse corral was located. That was why that particular animal had been selected by McLeod.

Burnham surveyed the signs left in the sand and gravel with satisfaction. A grin spread

over his sun-tanned face. He congratulated himself with these thoughts:

"I'd like to see the hombre who wouldn't read those signs to mean that I was jumped by Apaches while I was resting.

But he wasn't through conniving. He mounted the good pony, now unshod, jumped him off down a small canyon, much after the way a startled animal would jump, and kept him jumping for a mile down the sandy wash.

There was the whole story, left as plain as day for any expert tracker to read. The fleeing lad had just saddled up after feeding and resting, when he was jumped by the Indians. He had leaped to his horse, jumped it all over the place to dodge Apache bullets, and had headed for Tucson in a hurry.

The led horse, the signs would say, had leaped into the canyon, startled by the arrival of the redmen and the roar of their guns.

But this is one time the signs would not divulge the truth. Young Burnham was on the unshod horse, while the shod one was making for the corral in Tucson with only a pack on his back.

To make doubly sure the plan did not miscarry, Burnham proceeded a couple of miles down the canyon's wash and stopped again. In the saddle-bags were a pair of shoes to fit the horse he rode, but of an entirely different pattern from the ones he had transferred to the scraggly nag. These he put onto the hoofs of his mount—no horse could carry a load far in that dry country unshod—and was on his way.

The ruse was successful. Burnham learned later that Hambro and one of his men had followed the cactus-spurred horse all the way to Tucson, while the young scout made his way to Dripping Springs and safety.

Department Store on the Hoof

THE buffalo provided Indians with meat, moccasins, boats, clothing, blankets, tepees, bow-strings, quivers, belts, reins, and inspiration to name their off-spring after.

To the whites, chief usefulness lay in meat, robes, bull-whips and the sport of slaughtering the dumb brute. Later on the bones littering the plains were collected and train loads of them sent East to be smashed into fertilizer by unromantic machinery. But one of the strangest of uses was the employment of the huge beast as a draft animal.

Frank A. Root, agent in charge of the great stage line across the plains and mountains to California, tells of that in his reminiscences. It was in the early '60's that he saw in the streets of Atchison a wagon drawn by a yoke of buffalo. They belonged to a rancher from the Republican valley who used them to haul produce to the Atchison market. The buffalo were very gentle and in general behaved like a yoke of patient oxen, though of course, they attracted a great deal more attention.

It appears to be the only case on record of buffalo being so employed.

—Roy Vandergoot.



The squirming figure looked like a great, wingless bird.

His Guest, the Killer!

By D. B. Newton

In the midst of that roaring inferno, young Ray Ewing resolved that his future must be the bleak and lonely owlhoot trail, so that the tinhorn outlaw he hated might cheat the noose that had already waited too long for him.

THAT evening Ray Ewing strapped on his gun, kissed his pretty wife goodbye, and with grim determination headed for town. That scene was being duplicated throughout the surrounding range. Word had come with the rustling leaves that it was coming tonight—roaring Gilson was about to get its taming, and the bodies of dead gunmen

would lie in the dust of the streets tomorrow.

But for Ray Ewing there was an urgency in these swift-moving events that the others couldn't know. He prayed that when the moment came he'd find sufficient courage to complete the job.

The sight of roaring flames paling the stars above town made him lift his bronc into a

sudden gallop. He knew that it must be Ace Harner's Two Spot place. Was he too late already?

Ewing drew out of the way as a fast-moving horse raced toward him. It was pulling a light canopied surrey behind it. In the faint light of the half moon Ray could see Belle Conway upon the driver's seat, with the reins in one hand while the whip flashed and sprang in the other. She glanced at Ray, half-fearfully, and then snapped her whip at the bronc again. The surrey swept past in a lifting of fine powdered dust.

Ray pressed on. Up ahead, shouts began to be heard as the town grew nearer. A ragged, bobbing line of torches. Wild men and boys, with burning oil dripping from their flares. In the center of the shouting throng was a huge pole, and tied to it was a squirming figure. It looked like a great, wingless bird. The fantastic glow of torches showed the feathers that matted thick in a smear of tar, from dangling legs to lolling head.

Was that Ace Harner? Or was it only Luke Frane, who ran the roulette games for him at the Two Spot? Ray watched with a shudder of horror as the monstrous figure went by. No, he didn't think it was Harner. They'd do worse with Harner than merely tar and feather him.

Around the great, crackling bonfire that was the Two Spot, men with pails of water were running to soak down the walls of neighboring buildings and keep the flames from spreading. For them it was the end of an evil era. The old, wild days when Gilson was a wide open trail-drive town was long over.

The herds were gone now, and Gilson range became a quiet, settled place of ranches and farms and families. And yet, the Ace Harners, the Duke Franes and Belle Conways had remained; the Two Spot and Belle's house still standing as vestiges of that dead frontier. Men, with the thought of wives and children troubling them, had begun to wonder.

And now, at last, the cold-blooded murder of Sheriff Cullen was the final spark to set the town aflame in one mad and terrible evening. The purge, long overdue, was here.

RAY EWING hauled reins as two men went running past him into the street, almost under the nose of his plunging bronc. One of the men had lost his hat, and the leaping fire-light showed the gleam of reddish hair. The other, a puffing, stoutish figure, Ray recognized as Grant Burns, the county prosecutor. He called out: "Hey, Burns!"

The two halted, whirling impatiently. Ray pushed his horse abreast of them. "You get Ace Harner yet?"

He saw now that both men had sixshooters in their hands. Grant Burns, breathing hard

from running and excitement, said: "Yeah! The murdering skunk tried to run out, but the boys have him trapped now in an empty building down the street."

"The town wants a lynching," Ray shouted. "I'll help you get him into jail."

The lawyer snapped: "I'll handle this my way. Come on, Red!"

The pair ducked around the horse and ran on, their feet lifting blobs of dust. Staring after them, Ray's face had gone pale. With Sheriff Cullen dead, and with the attitude Burns showed, he knew clearly there was little chance of Ace Harner ever reaching a jail cell, once that hungry mob got him.

Ewing clapped in spurs again, plunged his bronc down the street, past running men converging on the empty shack where the hatred of the town had suddenly focused. A great shout went up as he neared, and then there was a struggle as men came surging out of the building with something caught in their midst.

Ray saw fists flying, heard the thud of their landing, the scuffle of many feet. From horseback as he crowded in on the edge of the mob he looked down into the swirling center of it; and then the mass of bodies parted for an instant and he saw the sweating, battered face of Ace Harner.

The eyes, glassy with fear and pain, met Ray's in that awful instant, seemed to hold him with their terrified appeal. And Ray thought then, of his year-old son.

He knew what Ace Harner and the Two Spot had done to the sons of other men; but that was not in his mind, exactly. Rather, he was remembering what had happened the year before, the time when Tommy was born, and Kate was in the hospital. He was thinking of the money he had needed then, and how no one had been able to spare it—until, in despair, he had been forced to go and beg a loan from Ace Harner.

He'd found the Two Spot owner in a genial mood, half drunk on his own liquor. Harner had heard the story; then dragged out a thick roll, peeled off a couple of bills and tossed them carelessly on the bar. "That do it?"

Crooked money, of course, lying half in a pool of whiskey Ace Harner's unsteady hand had spilled. But there was Kate's life to consider, and the unborn child. Ray Ewing, lip curling with loathing and self-disgust, picked up the bills. "I'll pay you back," he'd promised. "Ten dollars a month, if I can manage it—"

"Chicken feed!" Harner made a scornful gesture. "Don't bother me with it!"

But Ray had vowed then and there that he would square that account; that he would not be under obligations to such a man. Only—well, there was never any money to spare, in

the eternal struggle to keep a small spread floating. And there'd been more doctor bills, for Kate and the baby. Ray was getting by, but the months had passed and still that debt had gone unpaid.

And now here was Ace Harner, craven and beaten, in the hands of a lynch-hungry mob; and there was the dumb appeal of his glassy eyes, staring at Ray Ewing. Then someone's heavy fist smashed into the man's face, jerked his head back, smeared new blood across his mouth.

Hardly thinking, Ray Ewing clamped steel into his bronc and sent the animal bucking and plunging into the roaring tangle of men. They fell like tenpins before him, yelling and scrambling away from those steel-shod hoofs. Angry faces with opened, yelling mouths made fire-lit blurs in the streaking dust; hands reached for reins and bridle.

Then Ewing was leaning from saddle, seizing Harner by his torn clothing. The slight form of the gambler weighed little; Ray's strong arm lifted him easily, and he was backing the animal again, free of the tangled mob. One arm held the reins steady and supported Harner. With the other he swept his sixgun from leather, leveled it.

"This man is going to jail!" he yelled, throat burning with the effect to make himself heard.

The strong voice of Grant Burns stood out above the others. "We got other ideas! You keep out of this, fellow, or you may get hurt yourself—"

"Have you all gone crazy?" Ray insisted. The words broke off as a bullet flew wild past him, the sharp clap of the gun beating against the faces of the buildings. And then Ray Ewing knew there were too many of them, and that he could never save this man from them single handed.

He whirled his horse quickly, as other guns opened up. It stumbled, got its stride and lined out along the crowded, noisy street. Behind him a score of voices howled their wrath. There began a scramble for horses.

A line of saddled mounts, frightened by the shooting, were dancing at a hitch rail near the end of the street. Ray Ewing swung Harner onto the back of one of these, snatched the reins loose and shoved them into his hands. "Ride!" he shouted.

The tinhorn was nearly sobbing his relief. "God! I—I can't tell you—"

"Shut up!" Ewing snapped, fiercely. "This pays off what I owed you; now, get out of my sight because if I ever see you murdering face again—I'll gun you down myself!"

"But—"

Ray slapped the other's mount, viciously, and it plunged away into the night. He looked back, saw mounted men coming toward

him. He fired two shots in the air over their heads, to discourage them; then wheeled his bronc and roweled it hard.

BITTERNESS rode him. For he realized, for the first time, the enormity of what he had done. Ace Harner had a murder charge against him; and Ray, in helping the tinhorn escape—giving him a life in payment for the lives the tinhorn's money had saved—had put himself, too, outside the law. All because he had listened, foolishly, to the voice of his conscience. He thought of Kate, and the boy; the thought sickened him.

Somewhere ahead, Ace Harner was galloping to freedom; and back there the Gilson vigilantes were already coming. Ray Ewing figured, desperately. It was not far to his little spread, and he had a good lead. He might stop for just a moment—to say goodbye! Then into the hills, and into the strange and bitter life of the owlhoot.

He finally reached his small, neat house. As he tied his horse he glimpsed men and horses pouring over the valley rim. He had only minutes to spare.

He pushed open the door, and saw Harner and his wife together in the middle of the room.

Both whirled; he saw Kate's wide, startled eyes, and the sweat-streaked and bloody face of the gambler. Ewing slammed the door, strode forward.

"Damn you, Harner! I said I never wanted to see you again!"

Harner tried to stammer his explanation. "My horse—"

"And I said next time, I'd gun you down, myself! You murdered my friend. And now you come here where my wife—"

"He didn't hurt me!" That was Kate's hurried voice. "He only wanted to hide—"

"I don't care what he wanted. I'm going to kill him!"

He raised the gun, and saw terror wash into the weak features of the tinhorn, saw one torn and trembling arm go out as though to ward off the bullet. The trigger pressed into his finger.

"Ray!" Kate was dragging at his arm. "You can't shoot a man in cold blood!"

That stopped him in his madness—that, and the thought of the little boy lying asleep in the next room. Tommy Ewing—not the son of a killer!

THEY were still standing like that, Kate's hand on his wrist forcing down the barrel of the gun, when the drumming of hoof beats swept in across the still night. Harner let out a strangled cry of fear and then the posse poured, in a great tide of sound, about the house. Through the open window sounded the

stamping of hoofs and jingling of bits, as the tired horses plunged to a stop.

"Ewing!" That was Burns, the leader of the vigilantes. "We know Harner's in there. Send him out to us, and we'll forget what you did this evening; otherwise, we're coming in after you both!"

Ewing's jaw clipped shut, then, and shaking loose from his wife he turned on Harner. "Okay, you heard him," he snapped. "Go on!"

"Oh, God! No!" Harner cried. "Don't send me out there! I didn't kill the sheriff!" "Get out!"

Then Kate was between them, facing her husband. "Those men aren't responsible—they'll murder him!"

"I can't help it! I've got to save myself—and you and Tommy!"

"But, Ray!" Kate insisted. "Didn't you hear? He says he didn't kill Bob Cullen!"

"He's lyin'!"

From outside came the voice of Burns. "Quit stalling in there! We'll give him one more minute, Red, and then—"

Ewing shoved his wife aside, turned to the gambler. "Get out there!" he ordered, for the last time. Under the menace of his gun, Harner actually stumbled forward a step or two, but his eyes were on Kate, pleading.

Then suddenly the woman was hurrying ahead of them to the door, whirling with her back pressed against it. "You can't do this, Ray!" she cried. "Remember, he saved my life once—and Tommy's! And I believe him when he says—"

The words stumbled on her lips; she stiffened, eyes wide as in shocked surprise. Outside, the sudden volley of gunshot died. . . .

"Kate—Kate!"

Ewing caught her as she fell against him, limply. He saw vaguely the tiny hole in the wood of the door behind her; then a string of lurid curses was sounding in his ears. The gun, hanging heavy and forgotten in his hand, was suddenly plucked from it. The door swung open. A ragged figure staggered out into the night.

Harner! Ewing stood there with Kate's body incredibly still in his arms, and stared out at the slight back of the man. Harner was striding down the steps and out to meet the posse, on legs that no longer seemed to tremble. The gun was level in his grasp. And there was a new set and stiffness to his shoulders.

Perhaps it was the thought that a decent woman had given her life for him. Perhaps—

Harner stopped and he stood there with the gun in his hand, plain in the light from the door. And the gambler was shouting at the mob.

"All right!" Harner cried. "You want to clean up Gilson—starting at the wrong end! You drive Belle Conway out of town, you tar and feather Duke Frane, you try to lynch me; but the higherup goes untouched! He goes free.

"Yes! I mean the one who really owned Belle's house, and the Two Spot—who took tribute money from every shill and con man that hit town. The one who thought it would be good for his political career, staging a clean-up of his own vice joints—especially since Sheriff Cullen had just learned his connection with them.

"The one who actually killed the sheriff, and laid it onto me, and had his redheaded gunslinger primed to plug me if I dared say a word. Yes, I mean—"

But he didn't have to speak the name, for at that moment both Red and his master, Grant Burns, began to work their sixguns. Harner staggered; went to one knee, coughing. But the gun in his own hand was thundering, and next minute Red was falling back over the tail of his pony.

Another bullet from Burns' sixshooter pumped into the gambler's body, and Harner sagged forward, caught himself with one hand against the ground. Sprawled there, he forced his gunarm up and took one last shot—and the lawyer was already dropping lifeless from the saddle as the gun slipped from Harner's fingers.

Ray Ewing had watched that scene, helpless and bewildered by the suddenness of it. The last shot faded into stunned silence. Then, as one man, the vigilantes came tumbling out of saddle. There was a doctor among them who beat his way through the mob quickly gathering around the fallen gambler. "Give him air!" he shouted. "For God's sake—"

But a man who was on one knee at Harner's side shook his head. "Nothin' you can do for him, Doc. He's gone!"

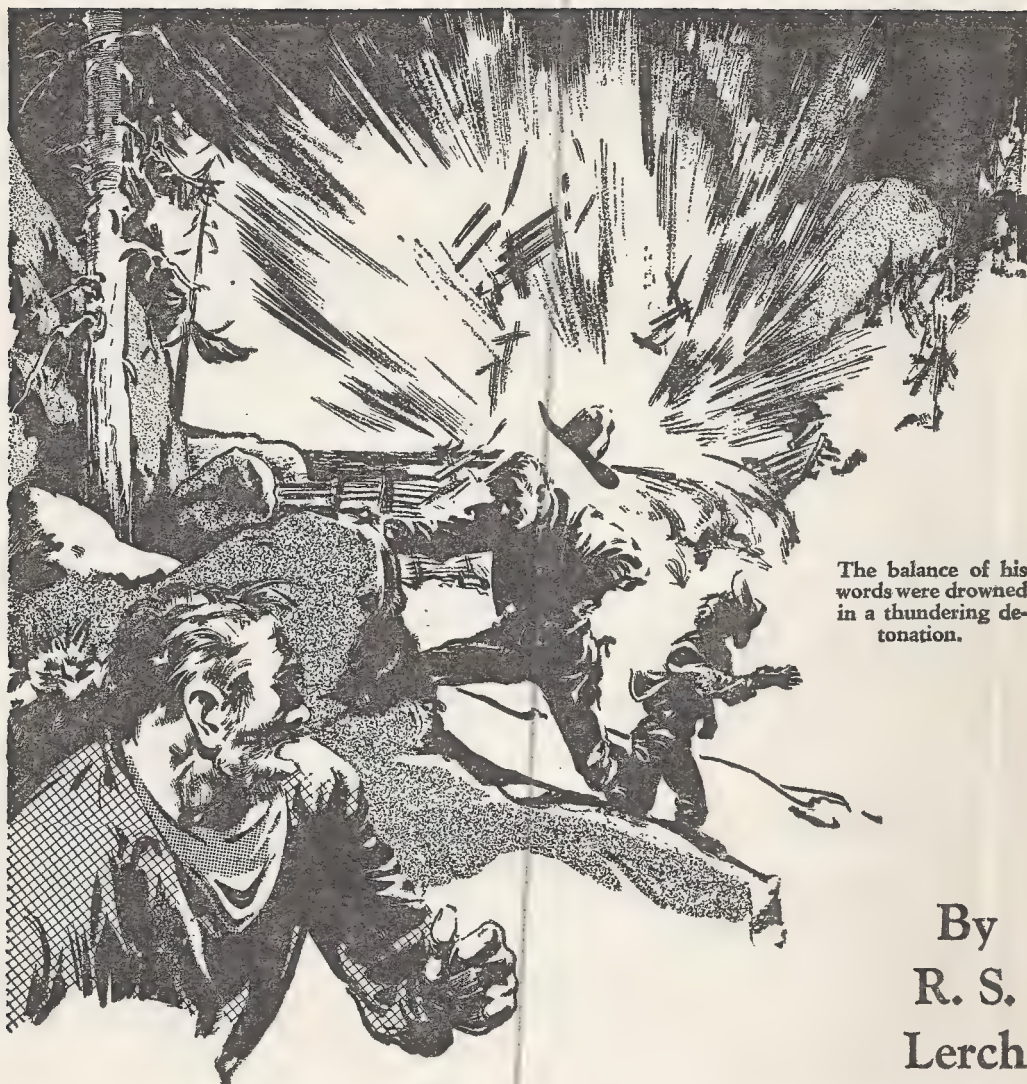
So the doctor rushed on up the steps and into the house, to where Ray Ewing knelt with his wife unconscious in his arms; and here, at least, there was a use for his services.

"Yes, we'll pull her through!" the medico declared. "The bullet went through the shoulder, clean—shouldn't give us any trouble. . . ."

"But Harner?"

The young rancher got up slowly, bringing clean air deep into the lungs. He went to the door, looked out at the sobered, chastened vigilantes knotted around the bodies of Harner, and of the two he had killed.

Ray lifted his hat in tribute to the slender gambler. Alive, Harner had been considered the town's greatest menace to peace, but now he was a hero who had purged the inferno with his own blood.



The balance of his words were drowned in a thundering detonation.

By
R. S.
Lerch

The Water-Right Rebellion

With his own kind of persuasion, Big Ben Crandall convinced those drouth-stricken ranchers that young Grant Savage's new-fangled irrigation methods were worthless. . . . But the suave-talking land-boss had forgotten that, while still water may run deep—the fighting blood of honest men runs deeper!

DOC CRANE picked up the instrument. "Grab your teeth, Grant. This'll tickle a little."

Grant Savage shifted his glance from the belt and gun on the chair beside the crude operating table and stared out the second-story window, across the dusty street below to the rolling Pinon Hills in the distance, and the gray, sandy wastelands stretching along their base.

The doctor leaned over the bared thigh, and the probe went into the blood-clotted hole. The

flesh quivered and the nostrils of the man on the table dilated. There was no sound and no other movement from Grant Savage. A moment later a pellet of lead dropped with a little tinkle into the tray.

The patient started to sit up, reaching for the tray. The doctor, picking up the bottle of lysol solution, snapped, "Lie down you young hellion."

Holding up the blood-smeared, misshapen bullet, Grant Savage murmured, "30-30," and thrust it into his vest pocket.

His breath hissed as the disinfectant bit into the wound. The doctor applied a gauze pad, and began dexterously to bandage it in place. He had not finished when the door opened and a lean, leather-faced young man walked into the room. He went directly to the patient's side.

"You guessed right, Grant. They're all in town, Singer of the 777, Bolt from the Circle K, Bandy of the Rolling 8, Tillotson and Kirchner of the JZ and Rocker T. Only Ban Crandall and Shorty Baxter haven't yet come in for the meeting. And since that chunk of lead come from Pickett's Bluff, on Crandall land, it ain't hard to figure who sent it, and why. Either Ban Crandall himself, or his tough ramrod, Shorty. And why? Because they wanted to make sure you couldn't attend the meeting."

Grant Savage grunted, then said, "Thanks, Tip. He should have aimed higher to stop me."

Tip Levens nodded. "And I reckon our hunch was right, too. I bet th' dam'll be visited. We don't want nothin' to happen at the wrong spot, now that the run-off's impounded and we're ready to irrigate. You've had law training, but that won't help much now. Bullet law ain't dead yet in this country, and that'll be where I come in."

"Maybe your hunches aren't so good, boys," Doc Crane said quietly, glancing out of the window. "Ban Crandall and Shorty Baxter are in town."

Grant Savage's hand slid the sixgun from its leather and he sat up. An evening breeze through the open window cooled his suddenly perspiring forehead. Two horsemen were cantering past, heading for the Silver Spur Hotel.

At the click of the hammer, Doc Crane switched his glance quickly to his patient. He made a half motion to interfere, then stopped. Instead he gave a quick gesture to Levens, checking Tip's advance toward his partner. Doc Crane's gaze centered on young Savage, who carefully sighted on the back of the nearest rider. There was a long moment of hesitation, then the gun muzzle slowly lowered while the hammer was eased down and Savage muttered a curse. A faint smile stirred Doc Crane's white goatee.

The doctor faced Tip Levens. "Wheel him into the back room and undress him. I'll be with you to help put him to bed soon as I clean up here," he said.

Grant Savage snapped, "I want my pants."

IT WAS early evening when the cattleman of Gunhammer Basin gathered in the small parlor of the hotel. Not all were ranchers. Several had brought their foremen, and in addition there were four or five from Ban Crandall's Rafter C, including his foreman, the squat, powerful, and pug-faced Shorty Baxter.

Crandall, seated behind a table facing the others, with Baxter beside him, said, "Guess all are here who're coming. Lock the door, Jim."

Jim Singer of the 777 arose slowly, his brows drawn together in a slight frown.

"Don't know's that's necessary—but maybe, at that, it'll save us from bein' interrupted," and he turned the key in the door to the corridor leading to the lobby.

For a long moment, silence settled over the room while Crandall's gaze surveyed the ranchers. He learned little. They were all older men, and their sun and wind-burned faces betrayed no emotion. If Crandall gained anything from his examination it was the idea that these men were inclined to be sympathetic, but were reserving opinions and decisions until he had exposed his whole hand. When he began to speak there was a partial apology in his manner that did not quite harmonize with his black, intolerant eyes.

"Maybe some of you think I'm getting too big for my britches—calling this meeting like I did, and now taking charge when all of you are cold settlers in the Gunhammer and I've been here only four years. But none of you came forward, and someone had to do something before we were all ruined."

He paused, once more looking over the quiet-faced men before him.

Finally old Starr Bandy of the Rolling 8 said levelly, "Get to the point, Crandall."

A faint flush appeared on Crandall's face and his voice became sharper.

"All right, but I'll go back a little and bring things up to date. You all know it's about that old Savage ranch next to mine, abandoned until last year, when young Grant Savage and his pal, Tip Levens, returned from school in the east to take it up again. It didn't take Levens long, with his engineer schooling, to see what could be done with the headwaters of Gunhammer Creek. And it didn't take Grant Savage long to see there was money to be made from irrigating that desert at the foot of them Pinon Hills, selling the land to dirt farmers, and ruining the range by cutting off the water we've been needing. They bought

both sides of the creek for about ten miles above their spread, then set to work."

"Grant said we'd have all the water we needed," one of the ranchers murmured without too much conviction.

"Sure," Crandall snapped, instantly taking up the implied challenge, and lifting a folded paper he had placed on the table before him.

"He put it in writing, too, here, in this agreement for me to sign. I understand every rancher in the Gunhammer Basin got one. It assures us fifty percent of the water of the creek at all times, free of any charge for such water, if we agree not to interfere with the impounding of that water, or with the dirt farmers who buy the land Savage will put under irrigation at the foot of the Pinon Hills."

"That's right," Starr Bandy put in. "What's the matter with it? I've known Grant Savage since he was born, and I knew his father before him, right up to the time he died. I'd trust Grant, as I've trusted his father, to do what he says he'll do, without any written guarantee. He's committed himself in writing, and made it legal. I'm goin' to sign."

"Just a minute," Crandall said quickly. "I'm not saying anything about Savage's intentions, or his willingness to carry out his promise—if he can."

That told. Several of the ranchers glanced questioningly at each other.

"Meaning what?" Jim Singer asked.

"Meaning this; that during a drouth, which comes about every four years I understand, we'll need all the water Gunhammer Creek can give us. Fifty percent won't be enough. More than that, when a man's going broke his viewpoint's bound to change. In a drouth year it'll be a matter of self-protection for Savage. How'll we know we're getting fifty-percent of the water? Savage's and Levens' money will be tied up in the dam. They'll have to give those dirt farmers water so they can grow and harvest their crops and pay Savage

and Levens the installments on their farms. Where will that leave us?"

"Just a minute," he cried, continuing quickly to forestall an interruption by Bandy. "There's one other fact that you ranchers have overlooked. We're cattlemen. This valley has always been rangeland. If any of the wasteland at the foot of the Hills, which, after all, is still in Gunhammer Basin, is reclaimed, it should be used for cattle, not for a bunch of patch-pants, sod-busting sons-of-nesters. Sure, I'm a comparative newcomer here, but I'm a cattleman; I've always been one, and I'll continue to be one as long as I live. I don't like sod-busters."

He stopped, and for once none of the old-timers had any argument to offer. Crandall waited a moment, then continued, leaning forward across the table and talking with tense earnestness.

"Our mistake has been in not stopping this at the beginning, in letting Savage and Levens go ahead with their plans until they completed building that dam in the canyon at the back of the Savage range, and in selling land on the strength of the irrigation they intended to provide. Tomorrow, or the day after, it will be too late. The water will be diverted, and once that's done we'll be fighting an up-hill battle. Now, *right now*, is our last chance to do something.

"We've been almost without rain all spring, and that means a dry, blazing hot summer. You all know it. In another month those two won't be able to live up to their promises, and in six months we'll all be through. We won't have water or cattle.

"And one more fact." Crandall's voice sank almost to a whisper. "If any of you hasn't doubted the sincerity of Savage and Levens before, why is it they're not at this meeting? They were notified yesterday and have had plenty of time to come in. I'll tell you why. They knew they'd have to face all of us at the same time, and to answer every question we'd fire at them. Now—"



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A DOOR behind Crandall, opening to one of the private dining rooms adjoining the parlor, swung silently back and Tip Levens eased into the room, moved sideways, and leaned against the wall. Behind him came a faint tapping, and Grant Savage, his face drawn and his forehead sweat-beaded, limped through with a crutch under his left arm.

The sound and the sudden shift of his audience's attention warned Ban Crandall and Shorty Baxter. They twisted around to face the pair behind them.

"We're a little late, Ban," Tip Levens said. "But we finally got here."

Grant Savage, leaning against the door he had swung shut, rested his weight on the crutch. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand slipped into a vest pocket.

He said, looking directly at the Rafter C foreman, "I noticed, Shorty, that you carry a 30-30 carbine in your saddle-boot. I took the liberty of examining it. It's been fired recently, and not cleaned. There was an empty shell in the chamber, too. Careless of you."

The ramrod's square face tightened, and his eyes got wicked. His right foot inched back along the side of the chair, allowing his sixgun to swing free, while the venom in his eyes centered on the wounded man.

Tip Levens stepped away from the wall and took the play away. "We didn't come here for that, Baxter, but if you want to start the ball, we're ready to dance," he murmured.

Shorty Baxter's glance shifted to Tip, and a faint change appeared in his dark face. Levens' hand was near the butt of his gun, and he was balanced, loose, and altogether too ready.

Savage spoke again, almost conversationally. There was a misshapen pellet of blood-stained lead in the palm of his hand.

"Doc Crane took this out of my leg an hour ago. It's 30-30 lead, and it came from Pickett's Bluff early this afternoon. That's Rafter C land, isn't it, Shorty? And you and Ban got here even later than Tip and I. It takes time to climb down from Pickett's Bluff."

Savage's gaze shifted to the cattlemen facing him. "It could be that this's the answer to the question I heard Crandall ask as we got to the door, the answer to why we weren't here at the beginning of the meeting. Also, I'm wondering what interruption Ban was afraid of when he had the main door to this room locked?"

From someone in the audience came a harsh challenge.

"We want more explaining than that, Grant. Seems like you'd better have some pretty good answers. Crandall made out a good case—and you'll have to talk fast and sharp."

"That's why I'm here," Grant Savage said slowly. "Not to talk fast and sharp, though.

I'll leave that to Ban. I merely came to remind you of something you've all forgotten."

He waited a moment. No one spoke.

"You've forgotten," he continued, "That the spring flood, which used to cover most of the Basin for weeks before finally running off, has been held behind our dam. The supply of water that used to be wasted will furnish moisture for the whole Basin, even in drouth years. That's what my guarantee is based on."

"You guarantee," snapped Crandall. "The water behind that flimsy dam of yours wouldn't last through a month of dry weather. I've been up there and seen it. If you'd spent your time building a good, concrete dam you might be able to put up an argument I'd listen to."

Grant Savage nodded. "Yeah, I know. We'll have more time to build a better one when this argument is settled and we know where we're at. But we're ranchers, same as you, Ban, and we had to spend part of our time chousing your Rafter C stock off our own range. Reckon you ran your stock on it for so long you forgot it belonged to someone else."

"But to settle this other matter—we came here to get your signatures to those agreements, so we can have our copies, and so we can start the water for those poor devils who're going to make their last try for a living out in the desert at the foot of the Pinon Hills."

Grant Savage was speaking to the ranchers now, his friends and neighbors. He ignored Ban Crandall and Shorty Baxter when he continued more slowly.

"I've made all the talk I'm going to. I visited you all and laid my plans before you before even starting, and most of you thought them good. Those plans are as good now as then. I own the land on which the dam is built, and I have the legal right to build it and to impound the spring freshet and to divert a portion of the water so long as it doesn't harm you. That's all there is—those who are with me will sign; those who aren't will not. But I'm going ahead until my idea has proved unworkable, with or without your consent."

THERE was no marked defiance, or any arrogance in his manner. He spoke his last words quietly. He'd scarcely ceased, however, when Ban Crandall jumped up.

"I'll tell you how you stand with me. I'm not signing, and I'm not taking this lying down. Any of you cattlemen who want to take a chance on loosing all you've got can stay and sign. I'm leaving this meeting and those with brains to see what will come of this will leave too," and, followed by his ramrod, he

stalked out through the door by which Tip Levens and Grant Savage had entered.

Savage had moved aside and made no effort to propitiate or to check them. All of the Rafter C men in the audience likewise left, unlocking the door to the corridor and filing quietly out. Others followed them. Finally only Jim Singer and Starr Bandy were left.

These two oldtimers waited until Levens had closed both doors and he and Savage had taken chairs near them.

Finally Singer spoke. "Me and Starr realized what maybe those other jaspers don't, that you two are being more than fair. Ownin' land above the Basin on Gunhammer Creek, you could divert all the water if you wanted to, or could charge us for what we do get, and it would take a long and costly court battle to stop you. Your father, Grant, and us two, came to this valley together. We stuck together then, and we'll stick with you now. Seems to me Crandall's gone off half-cocked."

Grant Savage shook his head. "Not Crandall. He knows what he wants, and he's worked on the other men to help him get it. And when he does, God help the ranchers and farmers in Gunhammer Basin—Ban Crandall won't."

Both of the oldtimers looked a little startled. Savage elaborated.

"We showed him the way. He wants us to go broke. And he wants the canyon where we have our dam. When we're broke he'll try to buy it for next to nothing, and if we're broke we may have to sell. Then he'll have a larger dam built in there, the ranchers will pay for building it, and then they'll get no water. The farmers will get it all. When the ranchers go broke, the farmers will be left without water until they're ruined and leave. And then the whole Basin will be Crandall's for nothing."

"That's my guess on his long range plan. I took a passear a year ago up Colorado way, where Crandall came from. A stunt something like that cost Crandall his spread up there, and he learned how it's done, so he's trying it here. My written agreement was meant to be your protection from me trying that scheme. The farmers, who will furnish us with green food and a change of meat diet we've never had before, have the same kind of agreement as you."

It took a moment for the two ranchers to digest the scheme of Crandall's, but when they had sulphurous words came up from their throats. Savage and Levens stood up.

"And now we got to get to our dam. Ban Crandall and Shorty Baxter won't be stopping to pick daisies."

Singer and Bandy likewise arose. Jim Singer spoke for both of them. "Reckon,

with that Baxter hole in your leg, you c'n use company. Me and Starr 'll trail along," he said dryly.

Levens said to his partner, "You stick here, Grant. You couldn't ride them fifteen miles if you was tied to a horse."

Grant Savage merely looked at his partner, then led the way down the corridor, hobbling along on his crutch. As they reached the lobby a little man with a white goatee rose from one of the chairs facing the street.

"Didn't hear any shooting, so that much's gained. Even if you won't stay in bed, you're still my patient. Come on. Guess there's liable to be more work for me at your place before this night's over, anyway, if the talk I heard from the Rafter C is any indication," and Doc Crane led the way out of the hotel and to the trap with its pair of bays.

Tip Levens, grinning now, helped his partner to a seat beside the doctor, then walked to his own horse. Singer and Bandy were already mounting theirs.

The road they took out of Gunhammer led northwest, skirting the rangeland on the right and the stretch of arid country on the left. Along the horizon from the southwest to the north the Pinon Hills rose in rounded cones and, behind these, into sharply defined and barren peaks. The shacks of the nesters were visible for a time, and several of them could be seen working on their irrigation ditches. A short twilight deepened into night and little blobs of yellow showed where lamps had been lit within their cabins.

These gradually receded behind and the three horsemen and the trap left the road and took a narrow trail up the valley of the Gunhammer, with the creek on their right. The valley slowly mounted and at one point Savage indicated a branch valley up which he told the doctor to drive.

"We got to go round-about a little in this rig. If we were on horseback we could get there in less time and over a shorter trail," he explained.

"If we were on horseback you wouldn't get there at all," Doc Crane answered tartly.

The terrain grew rougher, wilder. At one point the doctor had to get out and lead the horses along a ledge that slanted upward to the crest of a hog-back. When he came back he was muttering to himself. He turned suddenly to Savage.

"I've heard there's at least a half road cut through recently that goes through these hills westward to Pinon. Why didn't we take that?" he demanded.

"It goes near the dam, all right, but comes out ten miles north of the Basin. We'll leave the team at the top of this ridge. It's only a couple hundred yards farther. I think that I can manage."

THE balance was negotiated slowly and quietly, Tip Levens warning the two ranchers to go easy, that there might be trouble ahead. At last the trees crowning the ridge thinned and the party came into the open to look over a gorge. A little below them, extending westward around a curve in the gorge, whose walls rose higher and seemed to draw closer together westward, a long pool gleamed darkly. To the east the water spilled over a dam of logs, and from thence went coursing eastward toward the Basin. On the opposite rim were the outlines of several abandoned buildings.

Tip gestured to them. "Our camp. Deserted now and the workmen gone. The dam's finished. The farmers built their own ditches to the river, and put in their own gates. The gates are closed now, till we give the word."

Jim Singer had been looking down on the structure and the impounded water. He shook his head in doubt.

"You'd 've done better, seems to me, to have built the dam up the canyon where the walls are higher. Don't look like there's enough water backed up to last very long," he ventured.

Starr Bandy suddenly hissed a warning. "Someone's down at the dam. Hell, there're a half dozen. That'll be Crandall and his outfit, and we ain't got a rifle among us. Now they're running. B' gosh, they're heading for this very ridge and taking to the woods. Reckon they figured if you was comin' you'd go to the camp across the canyon. And I just now got a hunch what they're up to. Grant, damn it, you should've had sense enough to keep a guard over that dam until—"

The balance of his words were drowned in a thundering detonation. Logs shot into the air, half hidden in the cement and dirt and rocks thrown up with them. They fell back into a torrent of rushing water, to be borne down river as the lake behind the dam burst through with a roaring surge. As the last of the reverberating echoes died away the two ranchers began to curse.

"Right back where you started, Grant. Stone broke and not enough cattle left to furnish a good sized crew with a good sized meal. Boy, why didn't you—"

"Broke, Jim, and few cattle," Savage agreed quietly, "But not quite back where I started. Let me handle this," he finished with a snap and started limping forward.

The men who had scrambled to safety were coming out of the timber ahead. They advanced into the open and looked down on the destruction they had made. Suddenly one of them saw the men moving toward them. He gave a startled exclamation of warning that swung the others around.

Savage was hobbling along on his crutch,

picking his way among the loose rocks, but advancing steadily. A half pace in advance and a little to one side, his partner walked cautiously, his right hand resting lightly on his belt above his six-gun. Behind them came Doc Crane. Jim Singer and Starr Bandy had already disappeared, shifting into the darkness along the edge of the trees.

As Savage drew closer to the group ahead Ban Crandall, with Shorty Baxter at his side, stepped to the fore.

"Well, Savage, you had enough warning. What are you going to do about it? It's all over, and you'd best give up and take your medicine. You've still got your ranch, even if you ain't got enough money left to stock it properly, and I might even consider paying you rent for some of the grazing land you won't need," he said.

"What about those poor farmers who put all they had into their new homes on the strength of my promise to make their land productive?" Savage asked.

"To hell with th' sod-busters."

"And to hell with me, too, eh?"

"You've said it—and saved me the trouble," Crandall snapped.

"Uh-huh! Then, I reckon, I haven't any choice. Here, take this," and Grant Savage moved forward a couple of paces, holding out a sheaf of folded papers.

Crandall took them, looked down, but could not read in the dark.

"What in blazes is this?" he demanded.

"It's a bill for two thousand dollars covering rental fees on the use of my range for the four years you've been in Gunhammer Basin and I've been east."

Crandall laughed harshly.

"It is also," Grant Savage continued imperturbably, "a subpoena to appear at court in Pinon to answer charges of willfully destroying property in the value of ten times the cost of rental of my range. You did, carelessly or maliciously, burn down the barn and the big ranch house, you know. Also, the suit for damages will be amended to cover what you've done tonight. You may be very sure of that. Incidentally, Tip said bullet law wasn't dead in Gunhammer Basin. But he was wrong. A month ago, while I was in Pinon, I was deputized. We haven't needed to apply the criminal code before, Crandall, but now that it's needed the law is here."

Ban Crandall wasn't laughing now; he was cursing. With a sudden violent gesture, he tore the papers in half and flung them at the feet of Grant Savage.

Savage said, "That won't do you any good. The papers were served legally and I have four disinterested witnesses to that effect. Contempt of court is costly, Crandall. You'd better show up in Pinon."

Crandall cursed again. His ramrod said, "Now it's my turn to talk," and his hand flashed down and up.

There was a report, but it hadn't come from Shorty Baxter's sixgun. His weapon lay at his feet and he was cursing in a rising crescendo while he held his lead-torn forearm. Tip Levens crouched a little, his smoking gun muzzle tipped up to snap again into line.

The voice of old Jim Singer, from the shadows over to the right, snapped orders at the little knot of men behind Crandall.

"Don't move—none of you—if you don't want to do it for the last time. I'm behind cover and so's Starr Bandy, and we got you between us."

"That's right," came the level voice of the second old rancher. "Only I disagree with Jim. Move—slow-like—raisin' your hands above your heads. Then separate, still slow, while Tip Levens passes among you."

THE Rafter C men could not even see who had issued the orders, and there was no cover for themselves within a dozen yards. Realization of their position brought reluctant compliance to the orders.

Tip Levens did a thorough job of disarming them, including Baxter and Ban Crandall.

When it was over, Grant Savage said quietly, "I reckon that's all. Hit the trail, Rafter C; you're trespassing. And Ban, I'll see you in court on the third."

There was hesitancy on the part of the Crandall men. They looked at their boss. Crandall had been doing a lot of thinking in a few minutes. Quite suddenly the starch went out of him. He took a step toward Savage, and his hand was raised in a half appealing gesture.

"This will put me on the rocks, Savage," he said slowly. "Isn't there some way we can fix it up? If I have to start at the bottom, all right. I can do it. I'll sign over my ranch, anything but to face criminal charges with the proof you've got now. I'd be behind stone walls for years—and—" his voice faded without finishing the thought.

"You got your check-book with you?" Grant asked quietly.

Crandall nodded, "In my saddle pocket."

"Get it, and a couple of you boys start a fire so he can see to write."

Crandall came back, squatted by the fire with the open check-book on his knee, and looked up at Grant Savage.

"We'll forget about the rental of my range," Savage said. "About three thousand dollars will pay for the dam and put me up a barn and a small cabin. Make out your check for that amount."

Crandall let a windy sigh of relief escape,

then wrote swiftly, tore out the check, and handed it to Grant Savage.

"You'll quash those charges?" he asked.

Savage nodded. "The next time I go to Pinon. I'll play fair, but you'd better, too, from now on. The charge for ruining the dam can be instituted later, you know. And now—you and your men are still trespassing."

The little group watched in silence while the Rafter C mounted and rode along the ridge, disappearing into the timber. Only when they were out of sight and hearing did old Jim Singer step around to face Savage.

"Grant, don't let me think you're as big a damned fool as this deal makes you out to be. I happen to know you're scheme took a good many times what you got from that rat. And what about those poor devils who settled on the desert strip on the strength of your guarantee? You got out of Crandall only enough to partially stock your ranch, and not enough even to start the kind of a dam you should have for your plan."

Grant Savage suddenly grinned, and his voice became mocking. "Why Jim, why would I want to build a dam when I already got one?"

The little rancher's eyes bugged out. "Are you crazy?" he whispered.

"Crazy like a den full of foxes," Tip snapped. "Grant had the whole deal figured out right from the start. He insisted on meeting trouble his way, legally, without any killings. I didn't think he could do it, but he did."

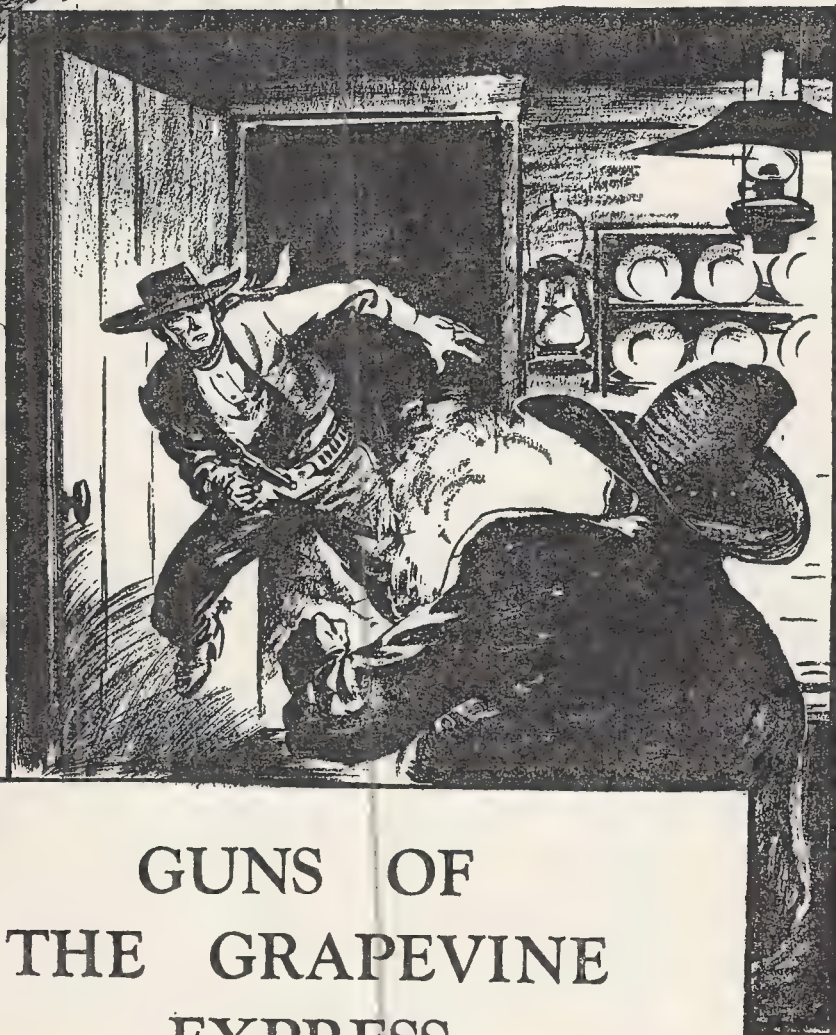
"But—but—he said he had a dam, when we all just saw it blown into toothpicks," Starr Bandy objected.

"Huh—that blasted thing." Tip grunted. "Ride up the canyon about two miles. It's straight-walled up there, and narrower and twice as high as here. Up there you'll see a real dam, concrete, with enough water stored behind it to take care of three Gunhammer Basins, and enough left over to float the Irish navy. Built by labor and with materials all brought in from Pinon without anyone in the Basin ever suspecting it. At that, one time when snooping around this bait that was just blown up, Crandall started up the canyon and had to be turned back by one of our guards. Reckon he was intending to look for a site for the dam he was going to build when we were wiped out."

The eyes of the two ranchers were shining by the time Tip Levens got through. Jim Singer drew a long breath, then spoke almost in a whisper.

"Starr and me been thinking for a long time that Gunhammer Basin needed young blood to finish what we oldtimers started, the job of building up our section of this country. Well, we know now that we got it."

To most of Bardee's rugged citizens, Mark Walrath's dying words were one huge joke. . . . But to young Dunc Marlett, the dead man's closest friend, it was an arduous and bloodstained mission, that could be only accomplished in the light of flaming torches and in the merciless, crash of deadly guns.



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Throwing caution to the wind, Dunc kicked open the door and plunged in.



Chapter I

BULLETS FOR BURDEE

EVERYONE heard the gunfire. The few strollers on the street alerted and made for cover. Violence had shattered the warm, flower scented inertia of peaceful Bardee. Women clutched their young ones and fell into excited hushes. Everyone instinctively sent gaze or thought toward Foley Drake's Black Hat saloon.

Down in the town blacksmith shop, where he was having a big black saddler shod, Dunc Marlett frowned deeply. Though lusty and prosperous, Bardee was not given to gunplay, and such as there was usually came as the climax of a rollicking evening. It was now only a little past noon.

The smithy ripped out a wondering "Holy smoke!" and Dunc turned toward the big double doors. The seering wind, fresh off the desert below the town, pressed his tan lean

cheeks. He cut across the street and rounded the corner.

Apprehension stabbed him at the hitch-rack before the Black Hat gave him warning. Mark Walrath's long-legged gelding and a gray bearing the Oxyoke brand. How long they had been there Dunc did not know, for he had been in the blacksmith shop the past two hours. But they shouldn't have been there together at all. Mark Walrath and John Ault were bitter enemies.

Dunc was the first through the batwings. Foley Drake came through the door from the back room, a heavy but powerful man, and his florid face looked grim. He shot Dunc a quick, baffling look, strode to the bar and poured himself a heavy slug of whiskey.

"No use your butting in there, Marlett!" he said after tossing off the drink. "It's the marshall's job, now."

Dunc hesitated in the door, then kept going. Drake put down his glass, turned and followed him. The back room was where the big games took place and where Foley Drake transacted most of his business.

John Ault was stretched on the floor near the door, a flung gun about a foot from an outstretched, inert hand, his face in a pool of blood. Mark Walrath lay in a grotesque heap at the other end of the room. His broad chest was blood stained, but Dunc thought he caught the slight movement of faint breathing. He dropped to his knees.

"He's dead!" Drake rasped. "Ault fired first, but Mark was the better shot! He got Ault smack between the eyes!"

The young puncher called softly, "Mark—it's me! Dunc!"

There was an almost imperceptible tremor around Walrath's eyes. The mouth opened a trifle. "Dunc—underwear—Henry Suberly's."

Then there was pronounced movement in a violent, hemorrhaging cough, and the chest was completely still.

Dunc lifted stormy eyes to Foley Drake. "This is crazy! What was he doing here? What was Ault doing here? What did you have to do with this?"

The saloon man shrugged thick shoulders. "I had nothing to do with it. Walrath was here talking to me when Ault barged in. They started to squabble and Ault went for his gun. I told you what came after that!"

"What were you and Walrath talking about?"

Drake's eyes went cold. "Listen, young fellow! That's none of your business!"

Dunc climbed to his feet. Half a dozen townsters had piled into the room by now. Walt Castle grunted, "It's been comin' for a long time! Any fool could see it! Drake, you had a part in it, no matter what you say. Running your big games that neither Ault

nor Walrath could stay away from! Knowing how they hated each other, it was your responsibility to keep one or the other outta that game Tuesday night!"

"It was none o' my concern!" snapped Drake. "And there was no trouble here Tuesday night!"

"But there's trouble here today!" Castle returned, with rising anger. "And it come straight from Tuesday night!"

"What I don't get!" put in frail Pop Lister, "is how come Ault throwed down on Walrath? You'd think it'd be the other way around! It was Ault that won Walrath's spread, lock, stock and barrel!"

DUNC MARLETT had been thinking about that. There was something wrong here, something very wrong. He turned a penetrating gaze on Foley Drake. "I'm going to demand an inquest, Drake. And you'd better have answers to all them questions before then!" He noted the gambler's cool shrug, turned and plunged out through the front door.

He hesitated on the street. The unexpected killing was only one of his worries. Susan Walrath, Mark's daughter, would be coming in on the two o'clock train, and that morning Mark had asked Dunc to meet her and bring her out to the M-over-W spread on the fringe of the Lightning Hills. She had been away for nearly two months, visiting an aunt in Dinksville. Dunc had come by in his buckboard, leading the sore-footed black he wanted re-shod, and Mark Walrath had stopped him. He had looked upset, all right, his cheeks grayed and his eyes bloodshot.

"Dunc I just ain't got the heart to face Susan," he had said desperately. "You meet her and bring her out and tell her on the way, will you?"

Dunc hadn't liked the assignment, but neither did he have the heart to turn the old man down. Susan had hated her father's weakness for whiskey and cards and the rich thrill of stakes running high and reckless. For much the same reason, Dunc remembered dryly, she had always been cool and remote with one Dunc Marlett, for Dunc and Walrath had been close friends and, in a sense, running mates.

But Dunc had not been in that fabulous game last Tuesday night. Like Walt Castle had said, that one was the outcome of a long series of games. The feud between Ault and Walrath had originated in the series, and this Tuesday night game brought the bitterness to a head.

John Ault was a more reckless gambler than Mark Walrath, and he had lost heavily during the past two years. Yet the country had an idea Foley Drake had pocketed more of the winnings than had Walrath. Word of the last game had already spread from the

Lightning Hills on the west clear across the Moon Throw range to the Stico mountains.

There had been only three men in the game at the last, Walrath, Ault and Drake. Ault had been cleaned out of cash, and sight of his losings piled before Mark Walrath had moved him to blind fury. His Oxyoke spread was worth half again as much as Walrath's M-over-W, but he had put it up against Walrath's outfit and the cash. Drake had dealt the hand, and Ault had won.

Now both were dead, with Drake claiming Ault had made the first move in the shootout. Unanswered questions swarmed in Dunc's mind. What had brought Mark here to see Drake? What had brought Ault? And exactly what had happened in those short seconds while the guns were flaming?

Above all, what had the dying Mark Walrath meant by his last words, "Dunc—underwear—Henry Suberly's?"

It was the law's affair from here on, but Dunc determined privately to do a little digging for answers on his own. Foley Drake could probably make his story stick, and he would have time to perfect it before he would have to divulge too much. The strange fact that the winner, in this instance, had shot the loser could probably be explained by Drake's claim that Walrath had been threatening Ault until Ault was spooked into killing him in self defense.

Meanwhile Dunc had a ticklish job on his hands, meeting the girl who disliked him and telling her not only of the loss of the M-over-W but of her father's death. Though he knew she would take it in her quietly assured way, he dreaded the job. A man doesn't like to carry that kind of news to the girl he has loved secretly and hopelessly for nearly five years.

It would be a little while before train time, and Dunc had another errand, so he crossed the street and entered Herb Thurston's bank. He talked with Thurston about a feed-loan he hoped to negotiate, and as he was leaving, Thurston shook his head and remarked:

"That's a sad thing, Walrath and Ault."

Dunc nodded, wondering for the first time what the legal aspects would be. After that fatal game Walrath had given Ault a deed to the M-over-W, which made it clearly Ault's. Now Ault was dead, leaving only a wife and a middle-aged, unmarried daughter. Ault had been heavily in debt, to Herb Thurston and to several others. Probably both spreads would have to be sold to satisfy the indebtedness against Ault's estate.

Dunc's face was grim as he left the bank. His concern was entirely with the lone survivor of Mark Walrath, who not only had this tragedy to face but what had begun to look like a destitute future. Dunc swore softly to himself as he headed toward the depot.

BARDEE was ten miles from the M-over-W and Dunc's own adjoining Cripple T spread. It was the nerve center of the Moon Throw range, which ran from the vaulting Sticos to the east to the low and bare Lightning Hills on the west. The range proper fell away southward, while across the town from it started the wildly broken flats known as the Beaver Sink. It all was rough and harsh country.

Prowling the cinder blanket along the tracks at the depot, Dunc dreaded the task that lay before him. Glancing down the street, he saw Foley Drake come out of the Black Hat and walk toward the city hall and jail. He moved gracefully for a heavy man, though Dunc always detected something slinking in his walk. He did not like Drake's type, the sacs under his masked, darting eyes, his cruel lips, his stubby, powerful and extremely dexterous hands. Drake was a man who turned his cunning to living off the efforts of others. He admitted this. He laughed about it and defied anyone to stop him.

Dunc Marlett was the direct opposite of the crafty gambler. Long and lean and sinuous, he had a cool though friendly face and intelligent, brooding eyes. In his middle twenties, he had run the Cripple T since his father died six years before. The responsibility had sobered him, perhaps too much.

The train whistle, low and hoarse in the distance, and Dunc moved in under the wooden canopy of the depot, pressing his shoulders against the drab brown wall. He waited thus while the train pulled in. Only three passengers got off, among them Susan Walrath. She looked around alertly, cool and fresh despite the heat, then she spotted Dunc and frowned.

Dunc crossed to her, making no greeting, and took her carpet-cloth valise. "I was coming in, anyhow, and Mark asked me to pick you up."

She turned, looking up into his eyes, thoughtfully scanning his face. She was only three years his junior, a lithe, dark girl whose every movement was graceful, gentle and controlled. Without smiling, she said:

"Dunc, something's wrong. I can tell from your eyes."

He nodded. "I can't break things gentle-like." He took a deep breath and went on, "Mark's dead, and Ault shot it out in the Black Hat at noon."

She turned away, and for a moment it seemed that she had not understood him. Yet he knew that as a wedge can be driven into an oak without so much as the tree's trembling, so had Susan Walrath taken this news. She gazed at him steadily.

"I won't go out home, then. I'll go to Mrs. Douglas's."

That was well. Bessie Douglas or Bert could tell her the rest, about the loss of the M-over-W in that wild, cursed game. He said desperately, "Sue, I want to do anything—"

Only then did bitterness flicker briefly in her expression. "What more could you do? A long while ago I asked you not to encourage father in his weakness. You laughed and called me a silly, soft woman who couldn't understand such things. I understand now, Dunc Marlett—I understand much too well. And it's turned out just as I said it would! You've done more than your share!"

Chapter II

DUNC SPOTS A CLUE

IT WAS late afternoon when Dunc rattled past the Three Point nester colony, still driving the buckboard and leading the black. Abruptly he turned from the main road and headed down the little lane leading to the scattered, impoverished farms. All the way from town curiosity had been gnawing in his mind. He drew up at a small, neat house on the bank of Teal Creek. Sarah Suberly had seen him coming, and she appeared on the porch, her grayed, weather-beaten face warming in a smile.

"Hello, Dunc! Haven't seen you in ages."

"Bad news brings me now, Mrs. Suberly. Where's Henry working?"

"He's building a barn for Seth Winehill, over in the South Fork country. What's the bad news?"

"He been home lately?" Dunc asked. Henry Suberly had this little farm, but he worked out as a carpenter mostly, and often he was away for weeks.

"Not since he went over there. I had a letter two-three days ago, though. Why, Dunc? What's happened?"

Again he dodged the question. "Then have you seen Mark Walrath recently?"

"Why, yes. This morning. He stopped by asking about Henry, too. When I told him as how Henry'd wrote home for his winter underwear, he—!" She broke off confusedly, after a moment she continued, "Henry says it gets so cold up in that South Fork vicinity evenings and mornings he thought he'd beat the season and change to woolens while he was up there. I just got the package off this morning."

Dunc looked at her kindly. "Look, Mrs. Suberly. Something terrible's happened to Mark Walrath. I've got to know what he said to you this morning!" He told her about the killing, and what Walrath's last words had been. Sarah Suberly was a woman he knew he could trust.

"Mark Walrath was plumb upset this morning, all right!" she told him worriedly. "I thought it was because of him losing the place and all, with Susan away from home. When I told him I was sending Henry a package he asked for a piece of paper and an envelope. I thought it was funny, his not mailing it. That'd be a lot quicker. Sometimes it takes a week to get a package to Henry on the grapevine express."

Dunc nodded. It was clear to him that Walrath had picked it as a means of communicating with Henry Suberly that nobody would suspect. And the young rancher knew he had to find out what was in that letter as soon as possible. That posed difficulties, for he would have to locate the package containing Suberly's underwear. Some day, perhaps, the U.S. Mail would carry packages just as it did letters, but that day had not yet come. Consequently the despatching of a bundle from one backwoods point to another, even though it was only over in the next township, was often a complicated matter. It was done by grapevine express, and he himself had used it time after time.

"How'd you send it?" he asked the woman.

"Priney Doolittle come by going into town. I told him to leave it at the stage office. Their driver can take it to Four Corners. That's fifteen-twenty miles from Seth Winehill's, but there's somebody going in once in awhile, Henry says. He'll get his woolens before frost comes, I reckon."

Dunc thanked her and drove on. He knew that note was of vital importance or it would not have dominated the dying Mark Walrath's thoughts. He knew that he could not wait until Suberly received his package through the normal course of events, so he would have to overtake it, carry the package to Suberly himself.

Late afternoon sun glared on the yellowed Lightning Hills. Short of his own Cripple T, Dunc turned down the lane to the M-over-W. The big ranchhouse stood in a locust park across a big saucer from him, and Dunc's brooding gaze swept it in renewed gloom. This had been Susan's birth place and home and it was the work of the dead Mark's hand.

The M-over-W mostly in the seered, undulating hills, adjoining Dunc's spread on the one hand and John Ault's Oxyoke on the other. On all sides the bare land heaved upward in great jagged angles, bold curves and flat lines. It had a burnt-up look now in late autumn, a dead look, with only a swarm of thunderheads moving ponderously on the far horizon. Here as elsewhere on the Moon Throw the wind whistled day and night, and Dunc could hear its low moan as it whipped across high, hollow Stack Rock.

It seemed that life could not be sustained

here; but yet Mark Walrath had built a prosperous spread. It had not been easy. The hot dry summers, the fierce, relentless winters—these harsh elements of reality were what had made Mark Walrath want to play hard in his hours of relaxation. Susan should have glimpsed something of that, but Susan never had.

AS ELSEWHERE, the M-over-W was readying for the fall beef gather, but as he drove into the sprawling yard Dunc was struck by the inactivity. Then he sensed that word of the tragedy had already drifted out from town. A group of riders indolently watched him drive up. These men simply did not know who they were working for now, what changes might be made in their status and routine.

Buck Trevors, the foreman, climbed up from a hunker on the shady side of the saddle shed and strolled toward Dunc, his eyes confirming that the word was here. Trevors was a good man, but he was lost without Mark Walrath. Dunc got to the point immediately.

"You any idea, Buck, why Mark went into town?"

The foreman shook his head. "Been puzzling over that myself, Dunc. When he left here he seemed plumb upset, but he said he was heading for the Oxyoke."

"To see Ault. That's funny. He beat Ault to town. The way Foley Drake tells it, it was Ault who barged in on them a-smoking."

"Yeah, Peewee Andrews brung out the story. There's something wrong there, Dunc! Foley Drake's crooked'er'n a dog's hind leg!"

Dunc nodded. He knew there was little else the foreman could tell him. He thanked him and rode on. Just short of sundown he turned into the Cripple T. One of the men took his rig and the black on to the stables, but Dunc avoided the others who were obviously eager for news. He ate a late supper the Chinese cook fixed for him, ordered a fresh horse, then an hour later took to the saddle.

He turned directly across the yellow hills, determined to see if anybody on the Oxyoke could further enlighten him before he started the hide-and-seek game of locating the package containing Henry Suberly's winter underwear. He realized the grim humor of the situation—a man's death wrapped up in winter underwear. Dusk was folding in swiftly now, the immense shadows of the Lightning Hills washing like a grotesque sea toward the east. The short-cut took Dunc to the Oxyoke in two hours, but lights had come on in the scattered outbuildings when he reached there, though the big house was dark.

It was just as well, for Dunc had no wish to disturb Hattie Ault. He turned toward the bunk houses and presently located Pete Lard-

ner, Ault's foreman, and called him aside.

"Looks like you've heard, Pete."

"Yeah."

"Listen, did you or any of the boys see Mark Walrath here this morning?"

Lardner nodded grumpily. "I did. Walrath fogged in here about ten o'clock and caught Ault in the middle of the yard. Ault started to give him a cussing out for showing up here, but Walrath said he had come to talk peaceable. That there was something they had to get together on. They went into the granary, and that's all I heard until they come out."

"What did you hear then?"

The ramrod looked at him suspiciously. "Listen, Dunc! You ain't been deputized have you? What're you asking me them questions for?"

Dunc grinned. "Walrath and Ault were both friends of mine, even if they did get to hating each other. And I don't believe they killed each other. So go ahead."

"Well, when they come out Mark Walrath looked boiling mad. He said, 'Damn me, John Ault, it looks like you're setting pretty, on the surface, but you're a fool to stand pat on that! If you ain't got sense enough to save your own life, I guess I got to go see Foley Drake!' And he went outta here a-smokin'. That's all I know about it, Dunc."

"Ault didn't look sore, or anything?"

"No. But after Walrath left, he looked kind of worried. Then he got on his horse and lit out. From what I hear, I reckon it was for town."

Dunc struck the moonlit trail for home lost in thought. The mystery had only deepened, yet with it had come a heightened sense of sinister undercurrents. Yet one thing was clear to him now. Something had deeply disturbed Mark Walrath that morning. It doubtless came from the ill-fated game and the loss of the M-over-W to Ault, and it could not have been a matter of reneging, for that was unlike Walrath. It had to be something that affected both himself and Ault, making it seem necessary that he and Ault get together. Evidently Ault had not been convinced.

If it had been anything else, something stemming from their deep-rooted enmity, Ault could have done his gunning then and there instead of carrying the fight to town.

So the sign trail turned once more to the batwings of the Black Hat and Foley Drake. Failing to arouse John Ault, Walrath had gone to see Drake. On thinking it over, Ault had decided he wanted in on that meeting. Whatever had started gun powder smoking had come from the Black Hat.

The feeling was strong in Dunc that the key to the whole mystery lay in Henry Suberly's winter underwear, now somewhere on the grapevine express. He was up at dawn and

riding toward Bardee. He reached there at eight o'clock, just as the express office was opening. The clerk remembered the package.

"Sure. We sent it outta here regular express, on the three o'clock stage yesterday afternoon. The stage-driver probably left it at Alderway's mercantile, over in Four Corners. We got a lot of that kind of stuff. We just haul it to the closest point, and folks take a hand one way or another getting it on to where it's going. Say, that's funny. You're the second one to ask me if a package cleared outta here to Henry Suberly."

"Who was the other?" Dunc asked quickly.

"Lafe Overton. Drake's barkeep."

So he was to have competition! Dunc hit the saddle and rode a fast trail out of Bardee, heading toward the Beaver Sinks on the stage road to Four Corners. It was thirty-odd miles to that waypoint, and once more a red-hot sun had travelled up the cloudless sky before he reached there. A sense of deep worry had settled on him. Foley Drake had also heard Mark Walrath's dying words, and somehow he had learned the significance of Henry Suberly's underwear and the fact that it was on the grapevine, bound for Henry up on the South Fork. Drake had probably sent someone after it.

FOUR CORNERS was only a village of a few scattered buildings. Alderway's mercantile stood where another road crossed the stage road, and in its dusty, gloomy interior Dunc learned that he was too late.

"Just happened Ed Frisbee was in here from Swamp Creek right after stage time," Alderway told him. "Frisbee took the package home with him because he said he often saw somebody from Lightning Holler, which's about half way up to the South Fork. Say, mister, what's in that package, anyhow?"

"Underwear," Dunc told him, grimly. "Henry Suberly's winter underwear."

Alderway shook his head. "Henry must be mighty chilled the way folks're running around hunting his woolens."

"What do you mean, mister? Anybody else been asking about it?"

"Well—yeah. A jigger I ain't ever seen before. A hump-backed galoot. About a hour ago."

Dunc restrained expression, but as he swung into the saddle again his pulses were yammering. The hump-backed galoot would be Humpy Smith, more or less of a newcomer to Bardee, a man without visible means of support who hung around the Black Hat a lot and was considerably suspected of doing private work for Foley Drake. A tough customer, and Dunc's lips puckered in an involuntary whistle. He had some riding to do if he was to beat Smith to Ed Frisbee's place on Swamp

Creek, or if he were to recover the package if Smith got there first.

Chapter III

DEATH RIDES THE BACK TRAIL

A FEW miles west of Four Corners the road cut into the rougher portions of the Lightning Hills. The heat grew unbearable as Dunc rode into the lower defiles of the bare, rolling range, for little air stirred there. He crowded his horse until its black hair glistened with sweat. It was crucial that he reach Ed Frisbee's little Swamp Creek hill ranch before Humpy Smith. The fact that Foley Drake was so disturbed assured Dunc that he had nosed out a mighty important lead.

An hour out of Four Corners he came to little Swamp Creek at a point he judged to be six or seven miles below Frisbee's place. He remembered that the road cut a long loop to the south of the creek, and on sudden impulse he left it and turned up the creek. The bare, flat banks impeded progress but little, and in the end he would gain considerable time.

In another half hour he came up under a big bare hill and left the creek to ride to its zenith for a look-see. He could see the snaking road down to the southeast, but nowhere in the visible stretches could he detect the figure of a moving man. But he could not be sure that Humpy Smith had not already passed there. Changing course suddenly, Dunc dropped down onto the road and larruped westward.

He swung down into the little Swamp Creek settlement at one o'clock. He had been through the country before, and now he swung off into a little side road that led to Frisbee's little ranch. He came upon it abruptly at the end of a long swing around a hill, lifted in the stirrups and swore.

A ground tied sorrel stood outside the little peeled-pole fence around Frisbee's house. Bareheaded Ed Frisbee stood in the yard, talking across the gate to Humpy Smith. Dunc's lips puckered in a tuneless whistle. Smith had ridden one fast trail from Four Corners.

Dunc slackened pace and rode up leisurely. Humpy Smith spun around at the first hoof-clatter. Frisbee looked at Dunc and grinned a welcome.

"Howdy, there, Marlett! Long time no see! Light—we're getting ready to put on the feed bag."

Dunc swung down, turning to look at Smith. The evil pattern of the man's mind and spirit was stamped clearly on his face. But there was immediate portent, too, and Dunc sensed clearly that Smith knew what had brought him. A big, stooped man with a close-set, bullet-shaped head, Smith growled:

"Yeah, Marlett, you're a long ways from home! How come?"

Dunc let him have a low, easy smile. "A little cattle buying trip, Humpy."

"You'll find a lot of 'em up here among the jackrabbits!" Smith snorted. "Or was it chasing 'em that got your horse sweated up like that?"

Ed Frisbee seemed to sense the undercurrent in the exchange. He shoved open the gate, saying, "Come in and eat with us, boys!"

Hungry and considerably relieved that Smith had not beaten him thus far, Dunc accepted, and after a moment's hesitation Smith nodded. Yet he made no effort to conceal his suspicion and distaste. They ate on the vine-covered back porch, and they had barely started in when Dunc said abruptly:

"Got anything going up South Fork way, Ed? I'm heading that way."

The rancher looked at him quickly. "Why, yeah. I got a package for Henry Suberly I picked up down in Four Corners. Was holding it here until somebody come down from Lightning Holler."

The gunman shot Dunc a poisonous look. "I'll take it, Frisbee. I'm heading for South Fork, too." He was clearly angered that he had not thought of that easy way of broaching the subject.

"Nice of you," Dunc grunted. "But it just happens I'm going up to see Henry, so I can take the package right to him."

"I'm going to see Henry, too. I can take it."

With a look of suspicion, Frisbee said, "What is this? You boys got a special reason for wanting to please Henry or something?" He indicated his dislike for Humpy. Frisbee concluded, by way of putting an end to the argument, "Remind me before you leave, Dunc, and I'll give it to you."

A little past two Dunc swung into the saddle again, with Henry Suberly's package lashed to the cantel, and his mind busy with the problem of Hump Smith, who was too dangerous a man to be left behind him.

"Come on, Humpy," he invited. "Long as you're riding that way, we might as well keep each other company."

"Keep my own company," Smith grunted.

Beyond Swamp Creek the road petered out, giving way to a well worn trail. Dunc followed it for a short distance, apprehension mounting in him, for it was ten to one Humpy Smith would try to bush him. A mile out of the settlement, Dunc swung off the trail, deciding to blaze his own route through Lightning Holler country and to South Fork.

IT WAS rough, tough going, but now that urgency was not so great he did not mind the slow pace. However, his anxiety had not

left him. Humpy Smith had all the earmarks of an experienced owlhooter. It would not be difficult for him to do a little tracking, and then an efficient job of bushwhacking.

Another man, Dunc reflected dryly, would have opened the package and letter and read it then and there, but Dunc could not do that, for it seemed a violation of Henry Suberly's right of privacy. He could only rush it to Henry, then ask Henry to divulge the letter's contents.

Dunc was sure that Humpy believed he could get the package someplace in the Lightning Holler country or he would have used the more desperate resort of making a rough play for it there at Frisbee's ranch. This knowledge kept Dunc alert, even when the mounting afternoon heat combined with the monotonous jog of the black to induce drowsiness.

An hour later Dunc was certain that someone was on his back trail. As he climbed higher into the Lightning Hills it was not always possible to keep to the ravines, and occasionally he had to expose himself in crossing a bare knoll. At one such point he stopped to scan the back country, and then it was that he saw the stalking sorrel, away and below, coming up a shallow trough.

Twice after that Dunc stopped to make a similar inspection, and each time he had not long to wait to catch sight of his pursuer. There was something leisurely in the way Smith came on, and for a long while Dunc was puzzled as to the open manner in which he advanced.

Again Dunc came to the upper reaches of Swamp Creek, at a point where it came out of the high, steep pass that was Lightning Holler proper. He had to go through his pass or ride miles around. Yet when he got his next glimpse of Smith it seemed that the man had made no effort to overtake him. This was one point where Dunc was glad to have the humpback clearly in evidence behind him, and he rode on into the canyon.

He was back on a trail worn by both men and animals, and some sixth sense kept his gun hand close to the cedar grips of his Colt. It was cooler here, and the gentle breeze of the canyon draught was refreshing on his sweating body. He skirted the big boulders piled immense and neat on either hand. Then a clipped voice rang out:

"Lift 'em, cowboy!"

Dunc stiffened in the saddle, cold running from brow to toe. A figure emerged from behind a huge rock to his right, and it was Foley Drake.

Dunc swore, knowing the utter foolhardiness of making a reach for his gun, for Drake came stalking toward him, a gun in either hand. Understanding now why Humpy Smith

had ridden so openly and leisurely behind, Dunc swiveled in the saddle to face Drake. Drake had doubtless accompanied Smith all the way from Bardee but had kept in the background at Four Corners and at Frisbee's, giving his gambler's hand a pat ace in the hole. He had ridden around and ahead of Dunc and laid this trap.

Drake was grinning as he came forward in his lumbering walk that somehow managed to remain graceful and sure. His black store suit and light Stetson were heavily sprinkled with trail dust.

"I sure bit on that one!" Dunc grunted.

"You did just that—now keep your hands up, Marlett. I'll untie that little package."

"Anyhow, you've come out in the open, Drake!"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?" the gambler grunted. "Do you think you can make any smear story outta my wanting to take Henry Suberly's underwear to him in person?"

"You heard Mark Walrath mention it," Dunc returned. "But how did you know what it meant? How did you know Henry's wife had sent him his woolens?"

"Priney Doolittle brought the package to town for her and left it at the express office. He laughed in my saloon about Henry wanting his woolens here in the middle of August. The rest was easy. No, don't try anything smart, cowboy!"

Drake approached the black, holstering one gun. With the freed hand he began to fumble with the thongs securing the package to the cantel. Impulse swelled in Dunc Marlett. This, if ever, was his chance, before Humpy Smith had caught up with them.

It was a long chance but abruptly he took it. He dropped his eyes to the package, as if idly watching Drake's attempt to untie it with one hand. Then he swung, pitching himself away from the horse, his body twisting.

Drake fired, and Dunc felt the seering flame from the gun barrel burn his ribs as he connected. His impetus carried them both in a clawing, pounding heap on the dusty trail. Dunc's first objective was that gun and he reached both hands for it, grasping Drake's wrist. Steely fingers twisted the wrist until the gun dropped.

With a mighty heave Drake rolled free and scrambled to his knees. Dunc staggered up, pitching himself forward again, and again they rolled in the choking dust, each man now hammering with both fists.

Blood mixed with sweat to form mud on Dunc's face and hands, and the usually impeccable Drake was now a sight to see. He brought a boot toe against Dunc's side and the impact sickened the younger man. Dunc's jaw sagged open, and his breath entered him in ripping gasps.

Near at hand he caught the drum of horse hoofs, which told him that Humpy Smith was riding up. Desperation strengthened Dunc. Clawing to his knees, he grabbed Drake and sent home a series of fast, jarring rights and lefts. He saw distress in the beefy face, saw Drake sagging. Then lights burst over the entire scene, preceding a swift curtain of blackness.

Chapter IV

YOU ONLY DIE ONCE

DUNC had no sense of elapsed time when he opened his eyes again and rolled his sick, aching body in the heavy dust. He lay so for several minutes until his swimming vision had steadied, then he climbed drunkenly to his feet. It was clear that Hump Smith had smacked him from behind with something, probably a rock. It was not at first clear why they had not killed him where he lay. Gradually he understood that Drake had not considered him dangerous as long as they had the package and had not wished to risk another beefing. It might sound strange if told, but so far Drake had not incriminated himself in his efforts to intercept Suberly's package.

Successful efforts, Dunc remembered with a jolt. Doubtless by now they had read the contents of Mark Walrath's letter to Suberly. He sprang to his feet. From the unchanged position of the sun he was certain he had been out only a few minutes. Humpy Smith was unfamiliar with this country, and Foley Drake had never been a man to spend too much time away from his green plush.

Right now the pair was probably heading back toward Bardee as fast as they could crowd their horses. The black still stood nearby, and Dunc still had his gun, lending further evidence to his theory that Drake had not wanted to get himself into hotter water through what he did out here. Dunc limped toward the horse.

Drake and Smith would probably strike a new course going back, and it was ten to one they would head for the old cattle trail by which old time South Forkers had driven their beef to Bardee, which they would cross riding back down this Lightning Holler trail. A man riding along Big Pine Ridge stood a good chance of getting ahead of them. He knew he was going to take that chance.

Dunc dismissed the alternative of riding on to South Fork to see Henry Suberly, telling Suberly what had happened and asking him to explain. Suberly might know much, or he might know little, with the important information being in Walrath's letter. Even if he knew much, he might be reluctant to divulge.

it on Dunc's mere sayso. The letter was the important thing, and Dunc knew he had to retrieve it if the hardcase pair had not already destroyed it.

Thought of that possibility pumped energy into him, and Dunc swung into the saddle. He rode back down the Lightning Holler trail for a mile, then cut abruptly to his right, climbing a fast-rising defile until he came upon Big Pine ridge. Grateful for the barrenness of these Lightning Hills, he crowded the tired black to the utmost.

He was above the old cattle trail to the west, and he followed the ridge for an hour. At a point where he believed he was ahead of Drake and Smith, if it were possible to get ahead of them at all, he dropped down.

For years this had been only a game trail or the route of some itinerant. Dunc searched it carefully for sign of fresh passage but could find none. Hope began to rise that, if he had guessed their intentions correctly, they had yet to come along.

He lead the black into a thicket and hobbled it, then made his way on foot down trail for a hundred yards or more so the horse could not betray him with a friendly nicker. He carried his catch rope.

From a high point, ten minutes later, he saw movement that set his pulses leaping. For a brief moment two riders were clearly etched against the burnt yellow background, hurrying up the cattle trail. Dunc whirled and plunged through the thin undergrowth to a point he had selected on the trail.

He worked swiftly. He pulled off his boots and set them on the hardpacked trail, one ahead of the other. He propped up the toe of one with pebbles and the heel of the other. Then he moved to the bank, and with a long limb from a jackpine he swept away his own tracks. From the thin brush above the trail, a minute later, he examined his handwork.

The boots presented a hair raising effect of walking all by themselves up the hill. Gun in hand, he waited.

Soon he heard the slow slap of horsehoofs, for the animals were slowed to a walk by the grade, and conversation informed him not only that it was Drake and Smith but that they did not suspect anyone of being within miles of them. Dunc strained his ears, but it was only small talk and he learned nothing helpful.

The riders pulled abreast of him, and Dunc sucked in a taut-nerved breath. Then Humpy Smith yelled:

"Criminy, Drake! Look at them boots going up the hill!"

Both horsemen wheeled up, startled by the sheer incongruity of it, and Humpy Smith swore again. Dunc Marlett did not wait for it to dawn on them that it was a trick. He came out of the brush to their right.

"Your turn to reach, boys!"

The trick had been good, but it already had roused some animal sense of warning in Humpy Smith. Foley Drake jerked his head around, instinctively raising his arms. In a lancing movement, Smith threw himself groundward on the blind side of his horse. Dunc had no alternative but to fire.

Smith's horse spooked and lunged off. Frantically Foley Drake gipped his own animal out of the way, yet he did not try to bring down his elevated hands. The movement left Smith and Dunc facing each other. Smith was in a half crouch, a snarl of hatred on his face. He had not yet had time to draw gun, and now he seemed arrested in awful indecision. Slowly caution triumphed over impulse and he lifted his arms.

Dunc prowled forward on tender feet. He herded the two men together and gingerly de-fanged them. After Smith's demonstration of reckless nerve, he did not relish this job but knew it had to be done.

"Sit down, you galoots, back to back!" he ordered briskly.

They obeyed him only after he had fired a shot close to Humpy Smith's feet. Dunc shook out his catchrope and tossed a-loop over them, then made three or four turns around them. When he had insured himself as much as possible against treachery, he searched Foley Drake, finding what he sought in the inside pocket of the man's coat.

The letter had been opened, but the important thing was that it had not been destroyed. Dunc grinned at them coldly.

"Looks like you threw Henry's underwear away!" he remarked. "Which is a fine finish for them woolens, after all the excitement they've caused!"

He made a few more turns with the rope and cinched it tight, then sat down to pull on his boots.

"Don't you leave us here like this!" Drake raged. It was half a threat, half an entreaty.

Dunc shook his head. "Don't mean to, for long. You can work loose in an hour or so. And I wouldn't leave you unarmed in cougar country, with night coming, so I'll leave the guns here on the bank where you can get 'em, once you're free!"

Ten minutes later he was riding down the cattle trail, the unsealed letter in his shirt pocket still unread. It was still Henry Suberly's business, as far as he was concerned, and he meant to take it to the man.

JUST short of where the cattle route crossed the Lightning Holler trail, he found Henry Suberly's underwear, two red woolen shirts and two pairs of underdrawers, which Drake or Smith had thrown away. He rolled them up and fastened them behind his saddle.

Darkness caught him just beyond the Lightning Holler settlement, and Dunc rode fast, aware that some freak of circumstance might yet make it possible for Drake and Smith to overtake him. At a ranch just out of Lightning Holler he swapped the played-out black for a fresh horse. After that he made better time.

It was nearly midnight when he pulled in at Seth Winehill's ranch on the South Fork, and the house was dark. In the moonlight Dunc could see the half completed barn that had been engaging Henry Suberly's efforts. Dunc hailed the house half a dozen times without response before he rode into it. But his first footfall had barely sounded on the porch when an upstairs window opened and a man's voice demanded:

"Who is it?"

"Dunc Marlett, from the Crooked T. I've gotta see Henry Suberly!"

"Whatcha gotta see him about? Henry's tired."

"So am I, and it's important. Call him, will you?"

In a few moments the door opened and Henry Suberly came out, a blanket pulled over his shoulders, shivering.

"What is it, Dunc? Anything wrong with Lydie?"

Dunc laughed. "No, Henry. I brought you your woolens. You'll sleep warmer, from now on."

Suberly beckoned him inside and lighted a lamp. He was a big, white-haired man with young, genial eyes and a swift, sure tread. Dunc told him about the double killing in Bar-dee and the events that had lead up to it, for it was all news to Suberly. The carpenter whistled, his face going grave.

"I used to tell Mark Walrath he was riding for trouble. I think he knew it. Where does this leave Susan?"

Dunc looked sober. "On the end of a limb. The M-over-W's gone, as far as she's concerned, though I don't know where it'll wind up eventually. You say Mark knew trouble was coming. Why do you think that? I wish you would tell me."

The old man shrugged. "No particular reason. Just one of those things a man guesses, with a mighty strong feeling his guess is good. Some of the things Mark said, the way he acted, some things I knew he done."

"I wish you'd tell me, if you have anything definite in mind, Henry. I don't think Walrath and Ault killed each other. I think Foley Drake's behind it, somehow. That's why I went to all the trouble overtaking the package Lydie sent you. The morning he died, Mark gave her a letter and asked her to put it in the package for you. I have it here." He fished the letter from his pocket and extended it.

The carpenter took it, his forehead wrinkled puzzledly. "That don't make sense," he commented. He went to get his glasses, then he read the letter thoughtfully. Dunc could see it was short, only a couple of lines. Henry was still frowning when he finished it.

"Mind if I look at it, Henry?" Dunc asked.

Henry grinned. "It just tells me to see you." He handed the letter over.

Dunc read it in one glance:

"If anything should happen to me, Henry, fan your tail down to see Dunc Marlett. Tell him about the built-in you fixed me."

Dunc looked at the carpenter with moody eyes. "What does that mean?"

Reaching for his pipe, Suberly filled and lighted it thoughtfully. "Two-three years ago Mark had me build over the kitchen to suit Susan. Remember?"

"Reckon I do. She was as proud as a girl with a new doll house about it."

Suberly frowned at him. "That was the year after you asked me to figure on a house for you—before you found out she wouldn't marry you."

"We can just skip that!" Dunc snapped. Then he grinned. Henry Suberly availed himself of all the privileges of an old and well-liked man. "But what's the built-in Mark wanted you to tell me about?"

"It was just a safe place for him to keep his papers and money, when he had any around the house," Suberly replied. "It looks like he wanted you to look at something he had in it. He knew you couldn't find it without me showing you."

"Sure does!" Dunc felt excitement rising in him. Maybe there was something there that would crack this mystery! Quickly he told Suberly about his brush with Drake and Smith. "You reckon they could find that cupboard, now they've been tipped off there is one and that it likely holds something mighty dangerous to them?"

The old man nodded thoughtfully. "They might. They'd know it'd be in the kitchen. If they looked hard enough for that kind of thing, they might find it."

"Then!" Dunc said sharply, "get your duds on, Henry! We've got to hit leather right now!"

Chapter V

HIDEAWAY IN HELL

THE awful heat of the previous day climaxed between midnight and morning in a terrific electric storm. Then the Lightning Hills lived up to their name, forming a rolling, light-splashed bed on which the jagged streaks danced. It was enough to put the nerves of even the coolest of men on edge, and riding

through the hills with Henry Suberly that night, Dunc did not like it at all.

The wierd devil's concert subsided at dawn, and in the brightening daylight they rode up out of the Beaver Sinks onto the Moon Glow range, and at ten o'clock they reached Bar-dee. Both were exhausted and hungry as they pushed on to Suberly's little place on Teal Creek.

It was pleasant there, shaded by locusts and scented by Lydia Suberly's profuse flowers. She fed them their breakfast, and afterward they rested for a short while on the viney porch. Eagerness and anxiety crowded Dunc, but he knew that the old man was very tired. Presently he said:

"Well, Henry, if you can make it on out to the M-over-W with me and show me Mark's hideaway, you can come home and sleep for a week!"

"Sure, Dunc." Suberly climbed to his feet, himself worried. "I can't tell you but I can show you. We better high-tail it."

They rode on in the mounting forenoon heat. Out of the nester colony, they turned west again on the main road. Dunc's own weariness, that had pressed him heavily during the night, seemed to have vanished now and he felt refreshed and eager for what lay ahead. They dropped down the dip where the road crossed Teal Creek again and hurried up the far side.

It was at the top of the rise that the universe exploded for Dunc Marlett. He was conscious only of streaking lights, then blackness.

He was stretched flat in the dirt when he opened his eyes, and a voice was in his ears:

"Well, Dunc! Who's gunning for you?"

It took a moment for him to realize it was not Henry Suberly. As his vision cleared, he saw Buck Trevors, the M-over-W foreman, bending over him. Dunc lifted himself groggily to a sitting position.

"Where's Suberly?"

Trevors looked puzzled. "Ain't seen nothing of him. He was up on South Fork the last I heard!"

Dunc groaned. He had been caught completely off guard, not expecting that sort of action so close to home. It grew slowly clear that Drake and Humpy Smith must have been unsuccessful in their efforts to search the M-over-W kitchen, either failing to gain entry or to find the hideaway if they managed to get inside. So they had wanted Henry Suberly to show them, and they had taken him.

Dunc's horse was gone. He staggered to his feet. "Where you heading, Buck?"

"The ranch. Coming home from town. Seen you laying there in the road."

"I'll swing up behind you."

The bushwhacker, he decided, had not fired from the top of the bank, as he had first

thought, but from behind a big fir that stood alone some distance away, which accounted for the poor aim. Buck Trevors shivered.

"Criminy, Dunc, I don't like these goings-ons!"

"Why—been any other trouble?"

"I took a shot at some hombres prowling around the ranch, last night. During the electric storm. They was trying to get into the big house, sure as heck. Miss Susan come out last night, and I was kind of keeping a eye peeled, her being in the big house all alone now."

"I hope your aim was good!" Dunc growled.

The other shook his head. "Afraid it wasn't. But I scared 'em off." He groaned. "Then somebody takes a shot at you. And if he'd aimed a eighth of an inch to the left he'd of drilled your skull instead of knocking you cold." He pulled a fairly clean bandana from his pocket and bound it around Dunc's head.

They reached the Walrath ranch at noon. Dunc went through the back yard to the big house, and Susan Walrath met him on the back porch. Her eyes widened in alarm.

"Dunc! What happened!"

"Come inside and I'll tell you."

She was dressed in a boy's shirt and jeans now, but they did not rob her of her femininity. His eyes grew lambent as he looked at her. As he had predicted the shock and grief of her tragedy had not lessened her cool poise and self control. They passed into the kitchen, and without further to-do Susan brought disinfectant and bandaging to dress his ugly scalp wound.

"The sheriff get over from Ekton yet?" Dunc asked, as she started to work.

"Yes, with the coroner. He's holding an inquest tomorrow. Would have been today except he wanted you there and nobody knew where you were."

Dunc told her where he had been, what had taken him there, and what had happened to Henry Suberly.

"There's no use trying to find where they took Henry," he wound up. "For I've got a hunch he'll show up here pretty soon. They won't dare hurt him until they find out where that hideaway your dad had built is. Apparently it's a good one for Henry said he'd have to show me. You got any idea, Sue?"

She shook her head. "Why no. I never dreamed of such a thing. But we can look."

THEY hunted for an hour, covering the newly built over kitchen inch by inch, tapping boards, hunting for false panels. They discovered nothing.

"Have you any idea what your dad might have had in it?" Dunc asked, in exasperation.



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"No, I haven't. But there's something funny, Dunc. I was in the bank yesterday, before I decided to come on home. Herb Thurston was asking me about Dad's private papers. He was awfully anxious to see them."

"What were you talking about?"

"I went to him to see how things stood. He says the M-over-W's gone, Dunc. The deed Dad gave John Ault is with Ault's other papers at the bank. Thurston says that makes it Ault's and there's no way of breaking it. But I wouldn't try. I hated my father's gambling but I wouldn't try to welch."

"Of course not," Dunc responded. "But, Sue, I've got an idea the whole thing was crooked somehow, and if we can prove it the ranch is safe. I don't think John Ault was in on it. He thought he won the M-over-W fair and square. But remember, if you've heard the details, that Foley Drake dealt that final hand!"

The girl's eyes had widened. "You meant he might have done some cheating so that Ault would win the ranch? What good would that do Drake?"

"Remember that Ault was up to his ears in debt. If he died, all his debts would have to be settled before the estate could be closed. Which means that both properties would have to be sold. Somebody could pick up a couple of good outfits mighty cheap!"

"And you think Drake had that in mind?"

"I'm certain of it. Drake—and somebody else. What you just said about Herb Thurston throws new light on it. Thurston's the big creditor. He holds the Oxyoke mortgage. Foley Drake could have seen him last night, which would be why Herb Thurston showed such interest in any private papers Mark Walrath might have had."

The girl's cheeks had gone white. "I wasn't going to tell you this, before, Dunc, but now I've got to. Herb Thurston said he was positive Dad had some papers hidden away somewhere and it was important that the bank have them, and he's coming out this afternoon so we can hunt for them!" She shivered.

She went to the window and looked out. "Herb Thurston, he's here now."

Dunc stiffened, undecided whether he could accomplish more by sticking around or from keeping Thurston in ignorance of his presence. He was pretty sure now that the thing was heading up. He decided to let Thurston have a free hand for awhile, and slipped out the back way and headed toward the barns.

The M-over-W crew was still hanging around the home ranch, the plans for the beef round-up soon due halted until it was determined what the status of the spread was. Dunc kept out of sight for a few hours.

GUNS OF THE GRAPEVINE EXPRESS

Then a ranch hand yelled, "Hey! Look at that big blaze over toward Eagle Point!"

Buck Trevors swore. "Chouse yourselves over there and take a look, boys! Won't do to let that get going. Looks like the lightning must've hit a tree last night and it's been burning in the punk. Get some wet sacks and a wiggle on! I'll go with you."

Dunc resisted his initial impulse to go, suspicion stirring in him suddenly. Maybe it had grown evident to someone else that Herb Thurston's search was going to be fruitless, and this was a diversion to get the crew away from the ranch house. He watched the riders cut out of the yard, one by one as they hastily saddled, then when the last had departed he made his own devious way toward the big house, coming up on the blind side, and hid himself in the woodshed.

Within five minutes he saw that his guess had come close. His eye glued to a crack in the wall, he saw three riders hurry up out of the swail on the south side of the big house. Henry Suberly was in the lead. Behind him rode Foley Drake and Humpy Smith. Smith's sixgun was trained on the small of Henry's back.

Chapter VI

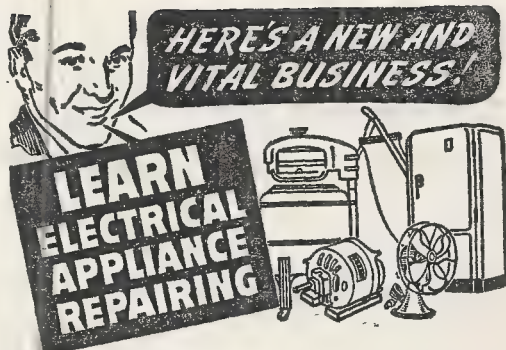
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THE old man's big frame sagged from his unbearable exhaustion, but his head was erect and defiant. From the open manner in which they rode up to the little side gate at the path leading in to the house it was evident that this had been planned as a resort should Herb Thurston's more devious efforts fail, that Thurston was expecting them. Drake and Smith swung down, then with a foul, lashing tongue, Smith ordered Suberly to dismount. The old man obeyed reluctantly.

Dunc kept to his hiding place, knowing that much might depend on him when the time came, that his best chance was not yet at hand, though his fingers groped toward the grips of his gun for reassurance.

Smith prodded Suberly across the yard, with Drake following. Smith's clothes still showed the trail dust he had picked up in yesterday's chase, but Foley Drake had changed and looked as fresh and debonair as ever, though welts and cuts on his face still showed from his tussle with Dunc at Lightning Holler.

"You can gun-whip me or shoot me!" Henry Suberly raged, "and I won't show you nothing. You're just a pair of hydrophobia skunks, and if Dunc Marlett ain't too bad hurt from your dry-gulching, Humpy Smith, he'll sure pay you for this!"



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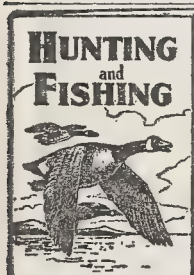
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"I can handle Marlett!" Smith snapped back. "As for you, grandpa, you'd better be smart and do what you're told!"

They passed on into the house, neither knocking nor waiting for an invitation. Still Dunc paused, his mind desperately fathoming the situation. Buck Trevors and his men might be gone for hours fighting the blaze on Eagle Point, yet the sound of gunfire might possibly carry to them and if it did would bring them on the run.

For a long while he could hear nothing inside the house except voices too low to understand. Then abruptly Henry Suberly's voice lifted in rage and pain. Dunc jerked erect. The time for action had come, for they had started in to torture the truth out of the old man.

Throwing caution to the wind, Dunc kicked open the door and plunged inside, gun in hand. A whipping shot pinged into the casing beside him, informing him that he had indeed been watched. He flung himself aside, noting gratefully that Susan was not in sight.

"Stand, Marlett!" Humpy Smith grated, "or old Suberly get's lead in his stubborn brain!"

For a long moment they stood in a strangely locked relationship, Dunc still holding his gun but not daring to lift it further, Smith set to drill Suberly, Thurston watching with a curious light flickering in his deep-set eyes, Foley Drake annoyed, nervous and impatient.

"Drop the gun, Marlett!" Smith snapped.

"Use it, Marlett!" Herb Thurston yelled.

Crazy movement ensued, then, which Dunc could not immediately understand but which he at once took advantage of. Whipping a gun from under his coat, Herb Thurston fired point blank at the dumbfounded Humpy Smith. It was a reckless move, yet through its utter unexpectedness it succeeded, and Humpy Smith caved in, unable to carry out his threat to Henry Suberly.

"Damn you for a double-crossing—" Foley Drake roared. Seeming to realize that Dunc's move would be against him, the gambler's gun whipped up and belched flame just as Dunc triggered. Drake did not try to fire again. For a moment he stood stock still with a look of amazement on his face. His hand came up to press his chest, then he pitched forward.

Dunc's head was still swimming from it all and he whirled toward Thurston, still uncertain. The banker grinned and casually holstered his gun.

"Thank God you showed up, Marlett! I couldn't stand watching them torture the old man! Your barging in like that gave me my chance!"

GUNS OF THE GRAPEVINE EXPRESS

"You're lucky Smith didn't put lead into Henry after all!" Dunc remarked.

"Maybe he didn't care a devil of a lot!" Henry Suberly cut in. He looked at the banker sourly. "I don't get this, Thurston! You looked like you was expecting these jiggers when we come in!"

Thurston was a stocky, colorless individual, and he shrugged. "I was. I let Foley Drake know I was suspicious of that so-called killing. And I let him know I was coming out here to see what I could find. There's something here he's afraid of. It was like seeing two and two add up to four when he and Smith showed up."

Sue came into the kitchen, then. "That's right, Dunc. He told me about his suspicions, which ran pretty close to yours. Tell Dunc, Mr. Thurston."

"Well, Marlett, it's like this. For a long time I've had a pretty good idea that Foley Drake was loaning John Ault big sums of cash and winning most of it back from him. That poker feud between Ault and Walrath was a strange thing. They hated each other and pitted themselves against each other so intensely they were blind to other things going on, though a lot of other people weren't. Drake held a lot of Ault's personal notes. I know because Ault tried to borrow money from me to pay Drake off. Since I already held a big mortgage on the spread I couldn't let him have it."

"Which gives you about as big an interest in the scheme as Drake had!" Suberly snapped.

The banker looked at him quickly. "I don't see what makes you so suspicious of me, Henry! If it hadn't been for me you'd still be in for some pretty cruel torture from Humpy Smith!"

"That's right, Henry," Sue added. "Let Mr. Thurston explain."

WHILE the old man mumbled his lips wordlessly, Dunc asked, "You thought Ault and Walrath's killing each other was a staged affair, too, did you?"

"Yes. Because Drake had been to see me about collecting on his notes. I told him they probably weren't worth much, because the mortgage would have to be satisfied before he could collect anything on them. He looked worried. I figure he saw his chance to throw ownership of the M-over-W to Ault, which would make the estate solvent enough to pay him off. It would be sheer profit, in the long run, since he'd already won back a lot of the money he'd advanced Ault."

Dunc nodded. "Sounds probable. The whole country knew about the feud and the big game. He only had to find a way to get them killed. But I wonder how it worked out?"



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"He only had to get Ault killed for his scheme to work," Thurston pointed out. "But I reckon that's a secret locked forever in Drake's heart!"

"No! No—not locked!"

Dunc jerked erect in astonishment. Foley Drake had spoken!

Herb Thurston spun, and again his hand stabbed toward his gun. Foley Drake's own weapon had flung wide when he fell. He was not trying to reach it now but only attempting to lift his head from the sticky pool in which he lay.

"Don't move, Thurston!"

Susan Walrath ripped out the words. She had been standing inconspicuously a little behind Herb Thurston. Now a small gun had come out of the pocket of her jeans, which leveled steadily at the banker. There was a look of quiet resolution on her face. "You thought you were taking me in, mister, with your two hours of smooth talk!"

Frantic desperation burned in the banker's eyes. He spun again, and knowing Thurston would not hesitate to gun her, Dunc sent his hand stabbing for his own weapon. This diverted Thurston's attention back to him. The banker's efforts had started sooner, but the double movement slowed him and the two guns roared together. Dunc staggered, clutching his shoulder, but Thurston caved in.

Henry Suberly had dropped to his knees beside Foley Drake. "You're dying, Drake! Tell us the rest of it!"

For a moment it seemed that he was too late. Then Drake spoke again. "Yeah—I know I'm finished. But that dirty son won't get away with his double-cross! We was in it together, though it was a lot like he said. We was going to take over the Oxyoke, and the M-over-W, with it only costing us half of what the outfits're worth. Thurston got spooked when he found out Mark Walrath left some kind of paper that might incriminate us. You see, once Ault had accused Thurston of scheming to foreclose his mortgage, and Thurston was scared Walrath was wise to that and might have put his suspicions down on paper. We sure tried to get that paper, whatever it is. The way things were going, Thurston must have figured it smart to throw the entire blame onto us. He was still setting pretty, for he could still go ahead, and claim it was only to protect his investment." The man coughed, a disturbing, gurgling sound.

"The killing?" Dunc asked desperately. "What happened that morning in the Black Hat?"

"That was a windfall," Drake said, after a long moment. "Humpy Smith killed them both from behind a screen where he was waiting. Walrath come in on the warpath and I had

GUNS OF THE GRAPEVINE EXPRESS

Smith hide there just in case Walrath got gun-crazy. What we'd always figured on was to beef Ault on the range and rig it so it'd look like Walrath done it."

"What brought Walrath to see you, then Ault?" Dunc asked.

"Walrath and Ault both had their snoots full the night of the game. I slipped Ault the cards that won him that big hand, but Ault didn't know it. Seems that Walrath was suspicious, though. He hated John Ault but knew he wasn't any card cheat. The next morning when he sobered up and realized what had happened, he got to putting two and two together. He told me about it, when he come fogging in to see me. It didn't make sense that I'd cheat to help John Ault win the M-over-W, and when he got to puzzling over it he got a pretty good line on what was really up. He knew Ault stood a good chance of getting beefed sudden, and he went to see Ault about it. Ault only laughed. He'd won himself a big spread and got even with Walrath."

The man rested, then presently resumed. "Walrath headed for town to jump me. He figured if he could persuade me how easy he had guessed it, it'd scare me out of going through with it. But John Ault got to thinking, after Walrath left, that if I admitted I'd cheated in that game he'd be out the M-over-W, so in he comes, too. When I saw that Walrath was going to make trouble, I gave Humpy the signal. You know the rest." He smiled faintly. "It'd have worked slick if it hadn't been for your woolens, Henry! I'd still like to know what's in Walrath's hide-away—"

It was something he never would know, for he hemorrhaged suddenly and before anyone realized it, he was gone.

SUBERLY straightened and turned, his face drained and his old eyes infinitely weary. "I reckon it's not very important, anymore,

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but I'd kind of like to see, myself." He moved across the kitchen to the sink, ran a glass full of tap water and drank it slowly.

Susan Walrath had interest only in the blood stain on Dunc's right shoulder. Again she fetched the medical supplies, while Dunc stiffly pulled off his shirt. The slug had gone through the flesh pad just under his armpit and hurt like fury. He gritted his teeth, watching Suberly, while Susan did her work.

Henry Suberly put down the glass from which he had drunk. He opened a drawer and pulled out a case knife. He inserted the blade between the edge of the sink and the panel facing it in front. The sink did not give, but the panel did, sliding down, revealing a shallow but wide compartment running under the entire tin portion of the sink.

"Mark was pretty proud when we run cistern water into the kitchen," he commented. "When I was boxing in this sink, Mark remarked about the space under it going to waste. So I fixed this sliding panel. He wanted a place to keep his private papers, for at that time he suspected some of the boys liked to come into the big house and prow around seeing what they could learn while he and Susan were out."

Dunc and the girl crossed and looked into it. Like Thurston and Drake, they had hunted everywhere but this homely, unlikely place they had searched for the secret compartment. It was crammed with the usual paper litter of a big cow spread, tally books, old payrolls, paid-off notes, deposit slips. Pawing into it, Susan brought out an envelope.

"I expect this is it."

She handed it to Dunc, and he saw that it was addressed to him. The letter had been written hastily, and the jerky hand showed the emotional tension of Mark Walrath's last hours:

"Dunc, I got a hunch I might be dead in another twenty-four hours. If I am, take care of my girl. That's all I've cared about for a long time. I'm not mailing you this letter on account of I'd be in mighty hot water with Sue if it happens I don't get killed. So I'm putting it here with the tally books and stuff you'll need to run the M-over-W. And I'm writing Henry Suberly to tell you about it in case anything does happen. Take care of her, son. The truth of the matter is that she loves you. I've known that since you was both knee high to a grass hopper. But you're both so cussed proud. And it wasn't my business to tell you. It's on account of I know Sue'd scalp me for writing this that I'm working it so I got a show to tear it up if everything comes out all right."

Dunc handed the letter to Susan, letting his

GUNS OF THE GRAPEVINE EXPRESS

lips crease in a faint grin. She read it and handed it to Henry Suberly, after which she kept her gaze on the floor.

"I'll be durned!" said Henry, finally.

"Funny thing is," Dunc said, "Drake and Thurston would've been all right if they'd just stood pat and done nothing! Mark meant to expose them, expecting he'd likely get killed at it, so he didn't put anything about that in here. He wasn't expecting the sneaky way Humpy Smith worked it. And his dying thoughts were of his daughter and his desire to see she was in good hands. His last words were to get me to rush that angle and learn the truth about Sue so I'd have the courage to take proper care of her!"

Not until then did the girl speak. "It looks like you've already taken a big bite out of the job, Dunc!" she said softly.

Buck Trevors thundered in then with the crew, attracted by the shooting. Dunc sent him to bring the sheriff, and there was other grisly work to be done. He said, "Go home and stay with Henry and Lydia for awhile, Sue. Hattie Ault won't lay any claim to the M-over-W once Henry tells her John won it on Drake's crooked deal. Nor will Hattie have any trouble paying off once word gets around what she was up against, and if we give her all the help we can. You rest up at the Suberly's. Later, maybe we can make living arrangements for you that you'll find satisfactory."

She looked at him solemnly. The old brittleness between them was completely gone, now. With her father still lying in Bardee, it was unseemingly that they speak the things that were in their hearts just yet. Sue nodded thoughtfully.

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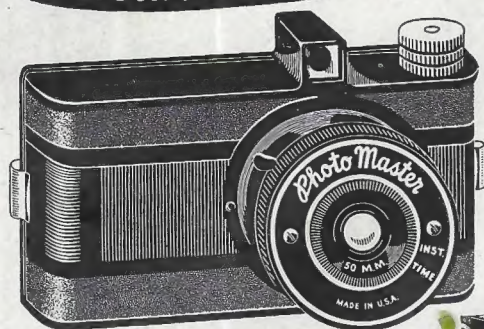
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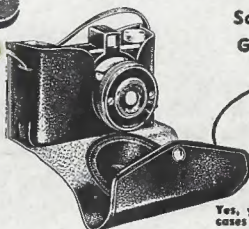
TAKE PICTURES YOU WILL TREASURE!

Imagine getting a genuine Photo Master with a ground and pitch polished lens in the face of one of the most drastic camera shortages in our history! A camera designed to take pictures in full color as well as black and white! A camera that will enable you to graphically record the events and people of the present for you to enjoy in the future. Yes, start today to take pictures of things as they happen. It's a real thrill that will bring you reflected pleasures for years to come. So order your Photo Master now! And if after the postman delivers it you don't think the \$3.98 you paid for it is the best \$3.98 you've ever spent—return it within 10 days and we'll refund your money cheerfully—and quick as a flash!

Sold on a "Examine At Our Risk"
GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Look At These Features

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Extremely Simple. Foolproof Operation
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Also Takes Excellent Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Level View Finder



This Made-To-Measure
CARRYING CASE
only **2c** with purchase
of Camera

Yes, you can have one of these made-to-measure carrying cases worth 75c for only 2c with every camera ordered.

As New As Atomic Energy!

The "Years Ahead" MIRACLE LIGHTER IMPERIAL LITEMASTER

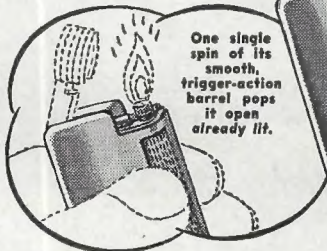
Read This
Absolute
Three-Way
GUARANTEE

One Flick
Does The Trick

ONE—if after you receive your Litemaster you don't think it's the greatest lighter ever made at the price you may return it in 5 days for a complete refund.

TWO—if your Litemaster fails to perform perfectly any time within 90 days we will replace it for you absolutely free.

THREE—we'll keep your Litemaster in perfect working order forever for only 35c to cover all postage and handling costs.



\$3.50

POST
PAID

It's New! It's Different! It's Perfect!

No two ways about it! Litemaster's amazing single action pops it open already lit! No more smudged, bruised fingers from spinning friction wheels to maybe get a light. Flame-in-a-flash Litemaster has all the features of expensive lighters plus. Its just-right size fits your hand as comfortably as a fine watch; has fuel capacity for "A Thousand and One Lights" per filling; its new spun-glass wick provides a lifetime of service without change. No other lighter at any price can match Litemaster at its low price. Thousands who have suffered bruised fingers and flustered tempers trying to coax a light out of outdated lighters will welcome this chance to prove Litemaster's sure-fire, simplified superiority at our risk.

WE CHALLENGE COMPARISON WITH LIGHTERS SELLING FOR \$10 OR MORE

COMPARE it for sure-fire simplified action — for instant flame—for lasting performance.

COMPARE it for beauty of design — for streamlined perfection of size and weight.

COMPARE it with the best you can find at any price — give it any test . . . anywhere.

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR LITEMASTER

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. LM2

608 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Please rush my Litemaster with Lifetime Spun Glass Wick and three extra flints. If not delighted I may return in 5 days for refund.

CHECK ONE

- ☐ I am enclosing \$3.50. Send my Litemaster POSTPAID
- ☐ Send my Litemaster C.O.D. I will pay postman \$3.50 plus postage

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR CAMERA

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. PC156

608 South Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush Photomaster at \$3.98 with Carrying Case for only 2c extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

- ☐ I am enclosing \$4 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.
- ☐ Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4 plus postage costs. If you want 3 rolls of No. 127 Film (enough for 48 pictures) for only 81c plus 15c postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.
- ☐ I am enclosing \$4.96 for payment in full. Include 3 rolls of Film postpaid. Include 3 rolls of Film C.O.D. I will pay postman \$4.96 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____



"Guess they'll enjoy sitting by the fire, too"

A COZY fireplace is nice, but you'd purr with satisfaction over a Calvert Highball no matter *where* you enjoyed it.

You see, Calvert is a pre-war quality whiskey that's *the real thing*...so mellow and smooth it just can't be duplicated.

Which explains why, year in and year out, Calvert is reported "the whiskey most often asked for by name." If *your* plans for tonight include a friendly sip, make it a Calvert Highball. But be sure it's Calvert, if you want *the real thing*!

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE **Calvert**



***It's the
Real Thing***

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits... Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits